

T H E   N E W  
A D V E N T U R E S

NA



DEADFALL

GARY RUSSELL

# DEADFALL

**'WE'VE A KILLER BRAIN-EATER ON BOARD, HALF OF US ARE DEAD, AND ALL YOU WANT TO DO IS DISCUSS YOUR WRETCHED FISH. DO YOU SENSE A PROBLEM WITH YOUR PRIORITIES?'**

Jason Kane is out to impress his ex-wife, Bemice, and he has found the perfect way of doing it. He's convinced she knows the location of the legendary planet of Ardethe - a site of untold riches and forbidden knowledge. So, after rifling through her bag for information, he sets off with his trusty crewman Emile to a barren and isolated rock.

As usual, Jason's plans go awry. Very soon people begin to die - and die quite horribly. They have awakened something beneath the planet's surface that's feasting on human brains. And when a ship full of hard-bitten female convicts arrives in the skies about the desolate world, the situation becomes even more complicated.

Someone is pulling the strings and watching the carnage. It could be any of the desperate prisoners, the reclusive crew, or the suspicious governor. Not knowing who the true foe is, Jason calls for help. Assistance arrives in the form of his old companion Christopher Cwej - just the man you'd want by your side in a tricky situation, but something terrible has happened to Chris, and now he can't even remember his own name.

## THE NEW ADVENTURES

**GARY RUSSELL** originally thought of calling this book **The Brain Eaters** or **Things to do in the Twenty-Sixth Century When You're Dead** but changed his mind. He's just squeezed writing a CD-ROM, a **Doctor Who** novel, half a **Simpsons** episode guide, a **Radio Times** comic strip or five and this novel into his incredibly busy schedule - and now feels that his own brain has been eaten.

Cover design: Slatter-Anderson  
Cover painting: Jon Sullivan

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**Science fiction**

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*‘Do you know what that arse-brained, git-headed, toss-pot has done?’ Bernice threw herself into Braxiatel’s favourite armchair.*

*‘I assume,’ Braxiatel said, handing her a mug of tea, ‘that we are talking about your former betrothed. One Mr Jason Kane.’*

*‘Irving, he stole the bloody Ardethan data crystal you gave me! He’s going there now to plunder the place for whatever twisted ends he’s got.’*

*Braxiatel nodded as he digested this. ‘Oh dear. That is not good news, I’m afraid.’ He stirred his own mug of tea with a pen. ‘Did your husband ever write a will?’*

*‘A what? Oh, I don’t know. Why?’*

*Braxiatel bit his bottom lip. ‘Because if what we think is really on that planet is really on that planet, I think you’re probably about to become a beneficiary to his estate.’*

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Gary Russell

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*For John  
(at last...)*

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And here in the real world, special thanks to: David Bailey (for the hell of it - is there a better reason?), John Binns (for saying you thought it was a good idea and meaning it), Simon Boucher-Jones (for the ICBMs), Matt Jones (for enthusiasm and biographies), Trey Korte (for keeping me talking), Rhonda Krafchin (for the flying penguins), Marc Piatt (for keeping up traditions), Justin Richards (for the Baygent Apotheosis), Simon Sadler (for keeping me supplied with musical accompaniment), Paul Simpson and Jenn Fletcher (for teaching me my ABC) and Dave Stone (for being so cool about Jason).

Extra-special hugs and love to Neil Corry for devotion to *Deadfall* in all its forms far above and beyond...

Extra-special thanks to the unknown person who devised mint-flavoured Kit-Kats, without whom I would not have got through this!

## SO IMPORTANT

++ MESSAGE TO: OLIVER TOLLAND (GOVERNOR) ++  
 ++ SCAVENGER SHIP #3  
 (DESIGNATION: MISTER KISS-KISS BANG-BANG) ++

++ VIA: COMMUNICATIONS SUBROUTINE OF BIOMORPHIC  
 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ++

### Readouts of KayBee 2 cargo:

1) Charlene Connor Convicted under Section 1 & 2 of Administration Charter Against Drug (sargol) Abuse. 3 convictions for theft of Administration property.

2) Lisa DeJoine Convicted under Administration Public Order Charter. Also convicted of numerous assaults on Administration Law Enforcement Officers.

3) Jeni Grierson Convicted under Special Provision 5, Administration Public Order Charter. +++ INFORMATION WITHHELD PENDING FURTHER PSYCHIATRIC REPORTS  
 +++ ALSO CONVICTED FOR NUMEROUS PETTY THEFTS.

4) Jay Hallett Convicted under Special Economic Measures Act for Grand Fraud and theft of Administration property. Convicted for assaults on a number of AMS personnel.

5) Siobhan Lloyd Convicted under Section 7 of Kastor Major's Social Behaviour Act. 3 prior convictions of political subversion.

6) ++ DETAILS UNDER REVIEW - MORE INFORMATION TO FOLLOW ++

7) Ghoti Rimananee Convicted under Section 8 for Embezzlement from the Administration.



8) Marianne Townsend Convicted under section 1 & 2 of Administration Charter Against Drug (sargol) Abuse. Convicted of Grievous Bodily Harm. Convicted on 7 counts of Actual Bodily Harm.

### Other Personnel

Warders: Two Grutchia Patrol Officers designated Cassius and Brutus.

Medical Officer: Dr Ayn Kranton, transferred from the Cal 2 Medical Research Facility on Calfadoria.

Pilot: TBA

Co-Pilot: Stanley Blummer, PS Ancillary Dept.

Navigator: Lucien Ryne, PS Ancillary Dept.

++ REPORT TO CMMDR C. GODFREY, CAPE WOOMERA,  
15.00 05/27/93 ++

ends

'Blue rock, Captain. Just how often do you find planets made entirely from blue rocks? Grey rocks, often. Brown rocks, fairly often. Black rocks, not that often. But blue rocks? Pretty rarely I have to say.'

'Well, it looks fairly common here, Professor.' Captain Elizabeth Lidiard put her hand to her forehead, trying to gaze further away without squinting at the harsh sun which was burning her skin. After eight years on the rim worlds, Lidiard was used to bizarre locations, but this planet was a strange one, to say the least. The odd rock formations that dotted the otherwise flat blue plain nicely deconstructed the horizon, but seemed very unnatural. One of her crew had suggested that it was as if the rocks were watching them, waiting to see what *they* did next. Lidiard had not considered anything so fanciful before, but now she could not get the idea out of her head.

'Sir?' Ensign Bunrat was hurrying from the base camp, as quickly as she could bearing in mind the heat, her sleeveless shirt soaked in sweat. 'Sir?'

Lidiard indicated that she had heard, but kept her eye on the horizon.

'Sir, Commander Peacock just radioed down. He says the Admin-Proctor's office wish to make an announcement about the find and what updates have we got?'

Lidiard looked to Professor Pierce. 'Well, Professor? What messages of glory can we send back to the *Trigan* to pass back to System Central?'

Before he could answer, Ensign Bunrat coughed slightly, her already dark skin darkening slightly as if she were embarrassed. 'Sir,' she said quietly. 'Commander Peacock

reported that the Admin-Proctor is en route to here - in the *Horatio!*'

Lidiard spat at the hard ground. 'Great, that's just what we need. Well, Professor?'

Pierce was dismissive. 'The Admin-Proctor can wait, Captain. My university dictates the terms of this venture, not System Central. Archaeology is not an exact science and cannot be hurried. We have not even discovered any sites yet, let alone found any conclusive evidence.'

Lidiard sighed. It was not worth repeating, for at least the fifth time, that his university was, in part, funded by System Central's grants commission and as such the Admin-Proctor probably had more right than most to insist on swift results. And the argument over whether archaeology was an 'exact science', or indeed a science at all, was one she had been forced to tolerate ever since setting out from Lyskos. Things had been so much easier during the tail end of the war, when ships like the *Trigan* were operated as they were intended, patrolling demilitarized zones, ensuring that no exclusion areas were breached, checking on newly recovered colonies, all that sort of thing.

Bringing a party of intellectual snobs out to a blue rock on the outer rim was not what Captain Lidiard considered a good use of resources. She understood the politics of the expedition - apparently this place, Ardethe, was home to some legendary civilization, reported to have destroyed themselves millions of years ago, leaving in their wake untold scientific advances. If the current System Administration could uncover this while in office (probably not for much longer as Admin-Proctor Lucinda Vrana had not proved to be the overnight success her campaign team had promised), it would be a major publicity coup. Vrana was obviously on her way here to ensure she was videoed at the entrance to whatever den of riches Professor Pierce and his team could dig up.

The only trouble was, they had barely started looking, and they'd been down here a week. Peacock was a fine man, and she knew her ship was in safe hands, but still regretted

coming down with them. After being cooped up in the *Trigan* for a few months, the chance for fresh air and natural sunlight had been enticing to say the least. This unbearable heat, the absolute brightness and the freezing cold night made her long for sonic showers, recycled air and some water that had been through the replamat fifty times.

‘Bunrat,’ she called. The eager young ensign was at her side in a second. ‘Call Peacock. Tell him to use whatever influence he has with Admiral Ellinsford aboard the *Horatio* to ensure that the ship is slowed down. Tell him to be honest with Ellinsford and say so far the professor has failed to find anything. And that if the *Horatio* arrives and the Admin-Proctor comes down to this hell-hole before we have more results, he is as likely to find his head on a rusty spike as the rest of us. And his pension will be cut. Yeah, get Peacock to tell him that. With any luck, Ellinsford will scupper his engines rather than let that happen.’

‘Right, sir.’ Bunrat saluted and she headed back to the shelter of the cave, where base camp was kept cool.

‘Well, Professor,’ said Lidiard, ‘you heard all that. I suggest you shove a few fireworks up your team’s rear ends and get digging. Because I imagine the Admin-Proctor has less tolerance than I have for any “exact sciences” and if she comes all the way down here and gets one of her flashy salmon dresses covered in blue dust for nothing, your university is going to lose far more than just you and your team’s contracts.’

‘Is that a threat?’ asked Pierce, staring at the captain through his tinted pince-nez.

‘No, Professor. No, it is a fact.’

She smiled with satisfaction as Pierce wandered off, shouting at his team as if it was all their fault he hadn’t told them where to dig. ‘Stupid git,’ she muttered. ‘With any luck you’ll get heatstroke and have to be shuttled back. Then I can take the excuse to go with you.’

Her communicator beeped, so she unclipped it from her beltpack and spoke at it. ‘Lidiard.’

‘Sir?’ It was Ensign Hurwitz, sounding far more excited than he normally did. ‘Sir, Harries and I have discovered something amazing, sir. I think you better come up here.’

Lidiard looked up and around, trying to pinpoint the caller. The last she remembered, Hurwitz and Harries were scanning the horizon from the top of the rocky plateau that the base camp’s cave was located in. And if they thought she was traipsing up there, in this heat...

There was a glint of metal at the plateau’s top, about two hundred feet up. Typical.

‘Do you really need me up there, Hurwitz? Can’t you just tell me?’ Inaction for days had tended to make her landing party overzealous about everything. In Bunrat, whose recent promotion from cadet was still making her excitable, Lidiard could understand it. Hurwitz, Harries, Croft and the others had been with Lidiard for some years now. Getting a thrill out of space exploration should have been ground out of them ages ago.

‘Getting cynical, Captain?’

The speaker was the only true civilian among them. Dr Harper had been brought aboard at the behest of Professor Pierce as the university had not supplied any medical officers and the *Trigan*’s MO was required by law, unless it was an emergency, to stay aboard the ship. And so Harper had come to Ardethe with them and made himself far too popular with the crew for anyone’s own good.

Including that of the captain, who threw an arm around his waist and kissed him fully on the mouth, her tongue rapidly tracing the inside of his mouth with pleasurable familiarity. ‘Heavens, Captain, what if your crew saw that.’

Lidiard smiled properly for the first time in the morning. ‘My crew are well aware of what is going on, Bernard. But you won’t hear them talk about it, because they know that anyone who does will be out with Pierce’s team, digging – or not, as the case seems to be – for eight hours in this heat.’ She wiped what seemed a bucket’s worth of sweat off her forehead, letting it soak into the wristband caked in sweat and dirt that had been clean only three hours ago.

Bernard Harper was an unusual doctor - very fit, very young and very attractive, with grey eyes that always twinkled from under this mop of black hair. He seemed a bit too rebellious to be someone from such a starchy profession as medicine, yet he was clearly respected. Especially by Pierce, in whom she would not normally place much sense of judgment, but in this case he had proved correct - Harper was perfect. In every way.

He was adjusting his yellow-and-black-striped necktie, which he always proudly wore. It was his one nod of respect to the medical college that had educated him - its traditional symbol of excellence, worn all over the system by graduates. He was rarely seen without it - except stark naked in bed, of course. Lidiard always enjoyed taking it off, slowly, slipping it from around his neck and -

‘What have your boys found up there?’

Lidiard shrugged. ‘Haven’t a clue. I suppose I ought to go.’ She shielded her eyes from the sun as she looked up. ‘Just the right sort of weather for a high climb.’

Harper passed her a bottle of water. ‘Add this to your backpack, Captain. Doctor’s orders. The last thing we need is you collapsing from exhaustion or dehydration halfway up.’

‘Right, Doc. Thanks.’ Lidiard shoved the bottle into her backpack, slipped the whole thing on to her shoulders (and, she was sure, immediately sweated another bucketful) and told Hurwitz to expect her in thirty minutes.

She and Harper touched each other’s face and she smiled again. ‘I could almost get to like you, Doctor,’ she said.

‘The feeling is mutual, Captain,’ he answered. ‘Now get going.’

With a nod of farewell, Lidiard jogged over to the base of the rocks and jumped on to a boulder, using it as a lever to spring up to the nearest handhold.

She was incredibly fit - she had to be - but the heat combined with the brightness made even the captain weary. Her shorts kept riding up her backside, her sleeveless top caught on too many lumps of rock and more than once she had to take a longer route because either the backpack or

her six-foot-three-inch body forbade her to clamber through a couple of small holes.

Two-thirds of the way up, she glanced behind her – the view was nothing short of spectacular. From the ground it was just blue rock, but from a height it was like glass, or a solid sea. The various shades of blue were crammed together, the strange rock formations like trees flanking strands of powder blue or royal blue, depending on how the sunlight hit them. No wonder Hurwitz had requested this duty for the second day: the climb might be a pain, but the view was breathtaking. If she was a poet, she could have written a book about the views of the planet Ardethe.

Of course, they'd shake a few of the established myths. Ardethe was supposed to be a dull, sandy planet with small reservoirs of green and red vegetation, according to the old expeditions of hundreds of years ago. Still, a lot could happen to a planet in a thousand years, although not enough to turn the rocks blue! No, those old myths and legends were proving to be just that – idealized dreams rather than scientific fact. It was obvious that none of those old explorers had really got out this far and found Ardethe. No, they had given up and returned to spaceports and dodgy bars with stories of their exploits. The old-style space prospectors were like anglers back on Earth: always boasting about the size of the one that got away.

After a bit more climbing, Lidiard found herself atop the plateau, alongside Hurwitz and Harries. Hurwitz was excitable; Harries was some way off, staring through a portable optical enhancer, making notes on a datapad beside him.

'It's the rocks, sir,' said Hurwitz. 'Yesterday, I was facing north but as the professor's team headed south today, we opted to follow that path. That's when we realized.'

'Realized what, Ensign?'

'Best if you look for yourself, Captain.'

Hurwitz reached out and took the captain's hand in his eagerness, but she did not move. The young man realized his error and apologized.

'I understand and appreciate your enthusiasm, Mr Hurwitz, but I would remind you that senior officers are not for tugging, dragging, pulling or any other kind of ing-ing. Is that clear?'

'Sorry, Captain.'

'OK. Now, show me.'

They quickly moved to the edge of the plateau and Harries passed his captain the enhancer. 'Straight ahead, sir,' he said.

Lidiard brought the device to her eyes, and it automatically read her retina print, accessed its memory for her lens and refocused accordingly.

It was the strange rocky shapes. The things she had felt uneasy about all this time.

'By the Goddess,' she breathed, lowering the enhancers. She glanced at her two eager crewmen and looked again.

They weren't just rocks assembled for no reason. When looked at from this height, from this angle, they were very clearly tiny parts of a much larger whole. They were an arrow, pointing south towards the horizon. Someone had left a huge marker for them.

'Dog crap on toast!' she said. 'I don't believe it.'

Lidiard unclipped her communicator, mumbling a 'Well done' to Hurwitz and Harries. She called to Bunrat, whose voice came crackling through almost before Lidiard had finished asking for her.

'Bunrat, contact Professor Pierce, Dr Harper and then Commander Peacock. I want an open channel to the ship set up for twelve hundred hours. We're going to have a conference call. I want everyone from our crew assembled in the cave. I'm leaving Hurwitz and Harries up here to maintain observation. I'm on my way down. Out.'

She turned and smiled at her two crewmen. 'You two all right up here?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. Once I've told everyone else, I'll get Croft and Sax to replace you.' She smiled suddenly. 'Do Sax some good to climb up this mountain. She's getting a bit flabby.'



The two men laughed. Sax was known for her obsession for physical perfection, usually running the length of the *Trigan* six times every morning and evening. Since being on Ardethe, she had barely managed one circuit of the base of the rocks before getting exhausted. No one disliked Sax, but they all thought she was, well, a bit weird to be so committed to tiring herself out.

When Lidiard reached the bottom, Sax and Lieutenant Footman were waiting for her, ready to escort her into the cavern and attend the open-channel meeting she had requested.

Harper was there of course, opting to sit directly opposite her rather than within arm's reach - sad, but good protocol. Professor Pierce was there with young Tim Davies, his assistant. Presumably he'd abandoned the rest of the dig team, leaving them to work in the sunshine. Well, that was his prerogative - so long as it didn't endanger her mission or crew, the archaeologists were under Pierce's supervision.

Ensign Bunrat was standing by the communications equipment while Chief Lincoln operated it. Within seconds a visual link had been established and Lidiard's exec, Commander Peacock, was neatly framed in the holographic globe, his face automatically following her as she walked around the group, a typical Lidiard thing when she was thinking aloud.

'We have a situation, gentlemen, that requires some thought. Professor Pierce believes this planet to be Ardethe, something of a legend I believe.'

'That is correct,' said Pierce smugly. 'Our researches have shown us that this world is the most likely site for the Ardethean culture.'

Harper interjected. "Most likely?" You're not one hundred per cent sure?

'We cannot be a hundred per cent sure of anything, Doctor

Harper, until we begin excavations. But, off the record as it were, I am convinced this is it, yes.'

Lidiard nodded. 'Commander Peacock reports that Lucinda Vrana, System Administration's Admin-Proctor, is on her way aboard the *Horatio*. As we all know, Admiral Ellinsford does not drag the *Horatio*, with or without the Admin-Proctor, literally across the galaxy on a whim. The discoveries which are waiting to be made by Professor Pierce clearly have a large appeal to the Administration, politically or otherwise. To be frank, if the Ardetheans were as warlike and powerful as we are led to believe, I imagine the Defence Ministry have more than a slight interest in all this as well.'

'If the Ardethean weaponry is found here, Captain Lidiard, rest assured it will return to the university with me and will not be made available to the ministry, no matter how much they ask. This tour is for scientific purposes, not to enable humans to blow other species out of existence.'

Lidiard gave the professor a look that could only be described as pitying, while Peacock actually laughed.

'Professor,' he said via the hologram, 'your sentiments are lovely, but I very much doubt you'll have any say in the matter.'

Pierce looked around the group, as if this possibility had never occurred to him. Lidiard sighed - the man was so naive, so stupid.

'But anyway,' she said, 'all this is irrelevant at the moment. So far, the professor's team have found nothing except piles of blue rock.' She looked at the hologram of Peacock. 'Robert, any news yet on the *Horatio*?'

Peacock smiled. 'Admiral Ellinsford reports that part of his drive system is faulty and being repaired. It puts the ship's arrival back by four days. Maybe only three.'

Lidiard nodded back appreciatively. 'Good. Well, luckily for you, Professor, my crew might have spotted something to save all our bacons.'

She told them about the alignment of the rock formations. Harper was immediately sarcastic. 'If it is a pointer, I bet it was put there as a joke recently. I mean, who'd shove great arrows on their desert plains just to help survey and archaeological teams?'

‘Someone trying to be helpful?’ suggested Davies.

‘Or someone trying to get us all killed,’ said Harper. ‘After all, the Ardetheans didn’t know they were going to die, so why spend so much time building arrows?’

‘I take everyone’s point on this,’ Lidiard said. ‘No pun intended,’ she added as Harper cast her a wry look. ‘I suggest that Professor Pierce starts excavating the area that the arrow indicates. I don’t see what we have to lose bar about half an hour’s shuttle time getting there.’

Harper stood up. ‘Well, I’m ready to go. As the captain says, not much to lose, is there?’

Pierce was telling Davies to warn the others to be ready to go. He then faced Lidiard. ‘Captain Lidiard, this is either a monumental discovery, the implications of which we cannot begin to theorize about, or it is a monumental wild-goose chase. But if the Admin-Proctor wants results, I imagine we cannot be seen not to try.’ He marched away, Davies scurrying along behind him, trying not to look too pathetic.

Lidiard shook her head. ‘Robert, see what you can make of this arrow thing. Run it through the *Trigan*’s memory banks. See if the computer can come up with anything similar from other worlds. And...’ She stopped, aware that Robert Peacock’s attention had been distracted. Then his face reappeared in the globe.

‘Sorry, Captain. Stellar Cartography have detected something unusual. Can I get back to you?’

‘Sure, but run that option past the computer, OK?’

‘Aye, Captain. Out.’

The holograph globe disappeared and Chief Lincoln switched off his equipment.

Lidiard turned to Footman. ‘Lieutenant, get everyone to the shuttle. I want to be ready to take off in thirty minutes.’ She looked at Bunrat. ‘Ensign, I’m according you the duty of giving the professor’s team a healthy kick up the arse if they’re slow.’

Bunrat grinned. ‘Aye, Captain,’ she said and hurried back into the heat to do some kicking.

As Sax and Lincoln began clearing out the equipment, Lidiard was left with Dr Harper. 'Well, this is a turn-up for the books, Bernard.'

Harper nodded. 'Interesting, though. The sort of thing that'll keep fossils like Pierce talking for the rest of their careers.'

Lidiard nodded. 'Yeah. And boring their students. C'mon lover, let's get to the shuttle.'

Commander Robert Peacock strode into Stellar Cartography aboard the AMS *Trigan* and tapped the young duty lieutenant on the shoulder. 'Explain.'

Lieutenant Fire-in-Veins pointed at her readouts. 'It's odd, sir. We didn't detect it before, simply because we weren't expecting to sweep that far out. I only did because, well, I was bored.'

Peacock shrugged. 'Better than playing poker with the computer, Fire-in-Veins. What've you found?'

She looked at him, straight in the face. 'As I understand it, Commander, Ardethe is the seventh planet of this nine-planet system.'

'Correct.'

'I've found a tenth planet, sir. Look, there.' A hologram lit up between them, showing an area of space, ten planets orbiting a sun at the centre. A small blue globe indicated the planet they were circling. As Peacock stared into the hologram, his communicator bleeped. 'Peacock.'

It was Lieutenant Parker on the bridge. 'Sir, we've fed the image uploaded from Ensign Harries' scanner into the computer. It's beginning its search now. What parameters shall I establish?'

'None for now, Lieutenant. We'll wait and see what the computer offers us.'

His attention was back on the hologram. 'Where did this tenth planet come from, Fire-in-Veins?'

'At a guess, sir? Well, from the way the planets orbit the sun, I think it's always been there. My belief is that it's *another* planet that's new.'

‘How new is new?’

‘In stellar terms? Pretty new. A few hundred thousand years at most, possibly less.’

Peacock nodded his understanding. ‘Any votes?’

Fire-in-Veins sighed. ‘Sadly, yes sir. I’ve put the orbits through the computer, run them, compared them with every other known information of orbits and

‘And?’

‘And, sir, I think this planet we’re above is the anomaly. I don’t think this is Ardethe. By Professor Pierce’s calculations, Ardethe is the next one along, but we couldn’t see it on our approach because something blocked our sensor sweeps.’

Peacock was incredulous. ‘Deliberately blocked them? To hide Ardethe?’

‘Or to bring us here, sir.’

Peacock considered this. ‘Well done, Lieutenant.’ He jabbed at his communicator. ‘Bridge from Peacock.’

‘Sir?’ It was Parker.

‘Contact the captain. I want them all back up here immediately. Put the ship on beta alert.’

‘Sir.’

‘Oh, Parker?’

‘Sir?’

‘Anything yet from the computer?’

‘No, sir.’ Parker’s minute hologram vanished from the portable communicator.

Peacock patted Fire-in-Veins’ shoulder. ‘Keep up the good work. I’ll be back on the bridge.’

When Peacock stepped back on to the bridge of the AMS *Trigan*, he knew something was wrong. The lights were dimmed to red, the beta alert he had ordered had become an alpha.

‘Report,’ he barked at Parker.

‘Sir, the computer’s gone haywire. It’s transmitting a signal somewhere back towards System Central on a frequency we’ve never used. To be frank, we didn’t know the computer could transmit on frequencies like this.’

‘Saying?’

‘Unknown, sir.’ That was the voice of the young communications chief, standing in for Lincoln.

‘Did we pass a message to the landing party? Does Captain Lidiard know of this yet?’

‘No sir,’ said the chief. ‘The computer’s blocked all our outgoing sensors.’

‘Cruk!’ That was Shinobi on sensors. ‘Commander, the computer has gone down, totally.’

‘Confirmed,’ reported at least four other stations.

‘But before it did so, sir, I was reading something strange from within the ship.’ Shinobi was bashing fruitlessly at computerized controls, suddenly denied him.

‘Intership communications gone, sir,’ reported the chief. ‘We’re cut off up here.’

Peacock slammed a button on his own console. ‘Chief, manual launch - log probe. The recording has stopped, but it should have everything up to one minute ago.’

‘Manual launch confirmed, Commander. Probe on its way back to the nearest System Admin base.’

Peacock acknowledged this, and then crossed back to sensor control. ‘Shinobi, what was it you detected?’

‘A power build-up, sir. The second the computer sent out its odd message, I got a flash.’

‘Did you get a triangulation?’

‘Not really, Commander.’

‘Explain “not really”.’

‘Well, my best guess was that it came from the civilian quarters. Possibly one of Professor Pierce’s team.’

‘But they’re all on the surface.’

Parker suddenly gasped. ‘A bomb, sir. It could be a bomb.’

Peacock was incredulous. ‘How? How would a bomb get past our security, Lieutenant? That’s simply not -’

The Administration Military Ship *Trigan* promptly exploded soundlessly into billions of minute fragments just above the atmosphere of the blue planet that may or may not have been Ardethe.

'Prepare for landing,' Lieutenant Footman called out.

The shuttle eased on to the blue rock at a precise location computed by analysing Harries' scanner readings. They were at the tip of the 'arrow' - on the edge of a massive crater.

After a few minutes, the shuttle's hatches sprang open and Lidiard led her crew and the civilians out, Bernard Harper at her side.

Ensign Sax, her huge body towering a good foot taller than her captain, was examining a portable scanner. 'Captain, we've lost all contact with the *Trigan*. I can't raise her at all.'

Lidiard operated her own communicator, but likewise got nothing but static. 'Some kind of interference? An eclipse of some sort?'

'Not that we've recorded.' Sax frowned. 'And they were too low in orbit to be blocked by any moons.'

'Ardethe has no moons,' muttered Hurwitz.

'Yes it has,' countered Pierce, strolling along behind them. 'Three. Woodward, Dallin and Fahey. Fahey is the biggest.'

Hurwitz looked to his captain for confirmation. 'But Professor, this planet we're on has no moons. I checked with SC before we left. Fire-in-Veins showed me.'

Lidiard frowned. 'And SC are rarely that wrong

The professor was fussing with his scanner, but took the time to give Hurwitz an evil look. 'Then we're on the wrong planet, Ensign, which seems a little unlikely, don't you think?' Pierce stomped off, leaving Hurwitz bemused.

'Captain, I'm not wrong about this. This planet does not have any moons.'

Dr Harper patted Hurwitz on the shoulder. 'Don't worry about old Pierce. He's a bit stubborn. He just won't admit he's made a mistake - probably getting this place mixed up with another planet he's visited. If he gets too stropky, I'll pump him full of hydrasol. That'll calm the silly old bugger down.' He looked at the captain. 'Well, Captain Lidiard, shall we follow and let the professor find his magnificent archaeological discovery of the millennium?'

Lidiard waved her people on, telling Harries and Sax to stay behind.

Harries offered to try to investigate the cause of the blackout in their equipment, but Sax looked most disappointed.

‘Now don’t you worry, Mr Sax,’ Harper explained to the ensign. ‘I’ll take care of your precious captain.’

Sax raised an eyebrow and smiled. ‘Aye aye, Doctor. I mean, sir.’

With a laugh, Harper and Lidiard began to follow the others down the crater.

Harries watched them go, shaking his head. ‘Despite the heat, Saxie, I think we got the better detail. That crater’s a good three miles deep and ten across. And I left my walking boots aboard the -’

Harries stopped talking as Sax reached down and twisted his neck around a hundred and eighty degrees, accompanied by a loud snap.

Letting the dead body drop to the floor, Sax then began rummaging through the shuttle’s lockers, retrieving every weapon she could and throwing them into a backpack. Once satisfied she had everything, she reached towards the communications console and erased all the logs recorded since their arrival, and then all the back-ups. She activated the computer and entered a code into it. Within four seconds, the computer had erased itself.

With a last look around the shuttle for traces of her work, and satisfied there were none, she threw the backpack on and headed to the ridge of the crater.

The others were tiny dots beneath her - to start climbing down right there would make her visible. But on the other side there was no chance of the human there discerning her from ten miles away.

With a grin of satisfaction, knowing that all her training had not been a waste of time, Sax began her jog around the side of the crater, planning to descend directly opposite the rest of her crewmates.



It was a good four hours later - as the sun was finally beginning to lower the heat and light - that Tim Davies came rushing over to Professor Pierce and Captain Lidiard.

'We've found something, Professor,' he shouted excitedly.

Even Lidiard found herself caught up in the moment, and jogged along with the others to where Pierce's other seven students were hurriedly pulling lumps of blue rock away from something.

'There!' shouted one of them. 'Metal!'

Lidiard pushed Pierce aside roughly, waving Croft and Footman over. 'What do you think, Lieutenant?'

Gingerly, Footman reached down, not quite touching the metallic slab. 'It's not hot, Captain.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake,' muttered Harper, reaching down to rub it, until Lidiard yanked his hand back. 'No one touches this, Bernard, until I'm sure it's safe.'

'Safe? Of course it's safe,' grumbled Pierce. 'Let me see.'

He barged through, deliberately knocking Lidiard slightly. In return for her earlier roughness, no doubt.

He slapped his palm straight on to the metal plate - or whatever it was - and was thrown back a good ten metres by a massive flash of energy.

Lidiard didn't even need to be told he was dead: she could guess that from the flash. Her blaster was out and trained on the slab in a second, while Harper staggered away, staring at his hand.

'That was nearly me...' he muttered.

Croft whispered in his captain's ear that Pierce was most certainly dead, but then gasped as Tim Davies touched the slab.

'You fool,' Croft shrieked, nearly deafening Lidiard.

But Davies was unhurt. 'It was a booby trap of some sort,' he muttered. 'The professor absorbed it all.' He looked up. 'Sadly, a fairly common practice for booby traps, but usually harmless after the initial energy drain. The professor ought to have known better.'

Lidiard looked back at the small bivouacs that Bunrat and Hurwitz had set up, thirty metres back. 'Head back to the camp,' she demanded. 'We'll discuss this there.'

As a couple of his students carried the dead professor, Lidiard stopped Harper walking after them. 'Bernard, time for your medical expertise. I want to know what killed him.'

Dr Harper nodded, and the captain then got out her communicator, calling Sax and Harries. After a few minutes, she gave up.

'Everything's bugged up now,' she grunted. 'I can't raise the shuttle.'

'Should we head back, Captain?' Footman was trying his own communicator.

'Not tonight, Lieutenant. But in the morning, take Croft and find out what's wrong. Hopefully Sax and Harries will have realized something's wrong and will probably meet you halfway.'

Further discussion was cut off as a massive wrenching and grinding noise drowned out everything else.

'Bloody hell,' breathed Footman. The metallic slab that had killed Pierce was rising up on a hinge. 'It's a trapdoor of some sort.'

They watched as Tim Davies and the other students headed back and, with a curse, Lidiard ran after them, telling Footman to get the others.

'Hey, wait,' she yelled, but the students ignored her, staring into whatever depths the trapdoor had revealed.

Finally she caught up with them, and winced as stale air wafted past her. 'This hasn't been opened for a very long time,' she murmured.

'We ought to go down,' said Davies. 'Professor Pierce would have wanted us to.'

'Considering he's barely cold yet, you're awfully keen to find more booby traps, Mr Davies,' Lidiard snapped. 'If anyone goes down, it'll be me.'

'But this is our expedition,' whined another of Pierce's students, but Lidiard's fierce look shut her up swiftly.

Footman arrived. 'Bunrat has stayed at the camp,' he said.

Lidiard was pleased to see Bernard Harper was there, smiling at her.

‘Lieutenant, I can’t see any way of closing this door. These students will sneak down here tonight if I forbid them. I think we should risk going in now. Leave Croft above the hatch, everyone else after me. You and Dr Harper bring up the rear.’

Footman nodded as Captain Lidiard lowered herself into the dark, feeling for any kind of foothold.

‘A ladder,’ she called out. ‘Perfectly strong.’ Footman passed her a flashlight, which she strapped to the side of her head and flicked it on.

The light cast a powerful beam, illuminating a circular drop, the ladder seemingly going all the way down.

‘Humanoids, then,’ muttered Davies. ‘If they needed a ladder, the Ardetheans must have been humanoid.’

Lidiard couldn’t fault that. Unless Hurwitz had been right and this, for some reason, wasn’t Ardethe. According to Hurwitz, Lieutenant Fire-in-Veins had been adamant about the satellite-less planet. Hopefully it was not Pierce who had been mistaken, otherwise this was a hell of a wasted trip.

‘OK, next group, one by one. Slowly.’

Hurwitz was next and, unsurprisingly, Pierce’s students. Then Bernard Harper, Chief Lincoln and finally Lieutenant Footman.

Lidiard eventually reached the bottom and walked along a perfectly manufactured circular tunnel, almost slipping as there were no flat areas. It was like walking inside a tube.

After twenty minutes of boring nothing, the tunnel expanded and she realized they were in a massive cavern.

Footman was bashing at his scanner. ‘I can’t get much sense, Captain, but it appears that we must be four or five miles down.’

‘Impossible,’ grunted Davies. ‘We’d be sitting on top of the molten core by now at that depth.’

‘And we’re not suffering any kind of atmospheric density problems. No bends,’ said Dr Harper.

Footman shrugged. ‘That was a long climb down. And the base of the crater upstairs was three miles down before.’

'Whoa.' Lidiard stopped, her flashlight etching bizarre light patterns on the walls. 'We're certainly in a room of sorts. Look.'

'Wish we had some more light,' muttered a student.

Harper agreed. 'Let there be light!' he called out, jokingly.

Whereupon the enormous chamber was bathed in a dull orange light, which momentarily dazzled them but at least gave them the ability to see clearly.

As the students oohed and ahhed, touching the walls and floors and noting the intricate lines of pipes and tubes, Lidiard crossed to Harper and her two crewmen.

'Strange idea of design, or do those pipes do anything? Where does this light come from? I can't see any sources. Why did it activate suddenly? I want answers, gentlemen.'

'The lights came on when I told them to,' muttered Harper. 'Goodness knows why.'

'Captain Lidiard!' It was Davies, standing by a doorway in the far corner that no one had noticed before. As they ran over, he was staring at them excitedly.

'Look through it!'

Lidiard did so.

It was a chamber about a hundred times the size of the one they were in, a slim bridge crossing to a far wall where a doorway could be seen. The walls went up as far as they could see and down into a murky black depth. If someone fell off the thin walkway ... well, their screams would probably get lost long before they hit anything. 'I've never seen anything like it,' she said slowly. 'Shall we?'

Footman nodded.

'All right everyone, listen up. That walkway looks strong, but can only take one person abreast. It's a long way over, possibly a fifteen-minute walk, so we go in line but slowly. We're not in a hurry and I don't imagine there's any way to get to anyone who topples over. So don't arse around or do anything stupid. Let's go.'

Ensign Bunrat was busying herself, sorting out a meal for the others and wondering where they were. It was almost

dark now and the blue surface of the planet would start to get very cold. The bivouac would protect them, but they would need to eat outside so as not to risk fire damage from the gas heaters.

She was ready now to start it up just as soon as Lieutenant Footman returned and told her to.

She sat back, leaning against the temporary shelter and smiled. This was her first deep-space assignment, the sort of things she had dreamt of. Her parents had not been very positive - the Pakistani sense of family meant that going away on a three-year tour of duty disrupted life too much - but they'd cope without her. And she had stored a message back on the ship that would be transmitted to them tomorrow, the regular letter-home day. She'd asked Ensign Bridgeman to ensure that her message was transmitted, and he was a pleasant and reliable man.

Everything was perfect and - and here was the lieutenant now.

Except it wasn't. It was Ensign Sax.

'Hello, Saxie,' Bunrat said. 'I thought you were in the shuttle.'

Sax shook her head. 'Nice place you've built, Bunrat. Well done. Where're the others?'

Bunrat shrugged. 'Gone exploring. About half an hour ago, I guess. Dinner's ready but I guess it'll have to be given to the dog. Which is a shame as I have excelled -' Bunrat stopped as Sax thrust a large carving knife straight through her breastbone, severing several major arteries close to her heart. A final spasm of pain raced through her as Sax twisted the knife suddenly and it was all over.

As Bunrat hit the blue rock, the last thing she saw was the sun setting behind the edge of the crater. 'Beautiful,' she hissed and died.

Sax removed a blaster from her backpack, set it to overload and threw it into the bivouac, then ran for the metal trapdoor.

As she reached it, the bivouac exploded and was vaporized by the intense blast of the weapon's discharge, leaving just a

dark ring of black on the stone surface. No trace of the camp or Bunrat's body. Sax was very efficient.

She began to climb down, four steps at a time. She knew she had reached the bottom when she trod on Ensign Croft, whose already dead body had hit the bottom of the shaft at a good thirty kilometres an hour after Sax had pushed it down before meeting up with Bunrat.

Sax left it there, passing hurriedly through the tubelike tunnel before emerging into the orange-lit room. She immediately spied the far door and ran over, seeing the slim bridge through it. On it, she could see the captain's party, so Sax raised her blaster.

She aimed, and fired.

Lidiard dropped to one knee, her own blaster up and ready as she heard the screams and yells.

Behind her, Footman nearly tripped over the side as he reacted almost as quickly. Both of them could see the carnage. Tim Davies was crouched in shock over one of the students, the girl who had mentioned the lack of lighting earlier. She was dead, her chest burnt through by blaster fire. Of the other three students there was no sign, although fading screams immediately told Lidiard where they had fallen to.

She was pleased to note that Hurwitz had shoved Dr Harper to the floor and lain across him, protecting him from whoever or whatever had shot at them from behind.

Chief Lincoln was crouched behind Davies, staring over the edge of the bridge, but another blast slammed him into the student and then he toppled off the bridge and into the abyss.

Footman dashed towards the stunned Tim Davies, whose hands were covered in the dead girl's blood. 'Lie flat,' Footman yelled, and was then hurled backward by another blast, bouncing to a dead stop, on his back, in front of Captain Lidiard, his eyes staring sightlessly up in shock. Most of the left side of his chest had been scorched away.

Whoever it was had used their own sort of blaster on them. Lidiard recognized the type.

Hurwitz cast a confused glance back at Davies and Lidiard before he was flung off the bridge - but not by a gun blast. His helpless screams as he plunged into whatever depths of darkness stretched below were nothing compared with the shock felt by his captain.

Hurwitz had been deliberately shoved to his death by Bernard Harper.

'Drop the gun, Elizabeth,' he called, but she kept it trained on him.

Tim Davies was looking back and forth like an animated tennis watcher, completely shocked and unsure what was going on.

Captain Lidiard saw that Harper had a blaster, but it couldn't have been he who had killed the others - Hurwitz would have been the first to die otherwise.

Then she saw Sax run up behind the doctor. Her immediate reaction was joy - a rescue. But then logic filled in the gaps.

As Harper walked towards her and Davies, Sax trained her blaster on the two survivors.

'I said drop it, Elizabeth,' Harper repeated, but she shook her head.

'I'm not stupid,' she said.

Sax shot her captain twice, once in the chest, once in the head and the remains of the body flopped down on the bridge.

'Such a waste,' muttered Harper.

Tim Davies looked up in terror. 'You killed them all! Why?'

'Do you know how much credit goes to this galaxy's universities, Davies? Do you know how much money is wasted in putting morons like you through a further-education system? Do you?'

'N-no ...' Davis scrabbled back further.

'Nor do I,' said Harper. 'But I'm fairly sure it is far too much.' He shot Tim Davies twice, and then kicked the body for good measure. 'I hate students.'

Sax caught up with him, and was about to shove Footman's body over as well as the female student, when Harper stopped her.

'Leave all that until later. What about the others?'

'Croft is back there, by the ladder. I got rid of Bunrat and the camp.'

'And Harries?'

'The body is still in the shuttle. We can dump it in space later.'

Harper nodded. 'By now the *Trigan* should be in little pieces and the message sent. We have about four days before they arrive. Let's get on with our mission.'

In silence, the two of them walked over the bridge and through a series of similar cavernous rooms followed by larger cavernous rooms with bridges. They walked for about three hours.

Eventually they came to the entrance to a huge building, a massive rectangular door dwarfed by huge blackened windows and stonework. Unlike the metallic rooms and areas of earlier, this was a building that had been carved from the planet's natural blue rock, dragons and other motifs etched into the walls.

'This is it, Sax. This is the home of the Jithii.'

Harper dug into his pocket and retrieved a small blue gemstone. He then felt along the dark doorway until he found a slot for the stone to go into. As it did so, the doors slowly swung backward, and both of them winced at the stench of stale air that rushed out.

'This hasn't been opened for years, Sax. Hundreds of years.' He pulled a tiny scanner from his pocket - not a standard ship issue one but a special one, custom-built for him and this mission.

They passed through walkways, rooms, libraries and covered passages. Everything was carved from blue stone, everything attached to everything else, like one massive sculpture. Chairs and tables, balustrades and steps, trellises and pergolas - all carved straight from the stone ground and immovable.



‘If I was a romantic,’ Harper said to Sax after two more hours of walking, ‘I’d say this was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.’

Sax shrugged. ‘It’s a building. What is it?’

‘Ironically enough, Saxie, it’s a university of sorts. Carved from the planet’s heart itself.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t worry about it. We can’t be far now. Hungry?’

‘Starved, but I’d rather eat when we’ve done what we’re here to do.’

‘Then, prepare to eat,’ Harper said happily, ‘because this is it.’

He pulled open another stone doorway and they walked into a dark room.

‘Let there be light,’ he commanded and the same orange light flared up. Harper then pointed to the far end, where a maze of tubes and pipes, similar to those they had encountered before entering the university, were clustered around a smoked-glass casket, like a coffin, raised on a blue stone dais.

Liquids and thicker substances were being pumped in and out of the casket via the tubes, looking most incongruous against the almost medieval look of the rest of the room.

‘In here,’ Harper said. ‘In here is what we’ve come for.’ He leant over and placed his blue gemstone into the appropriate slot again and, with a click and a whirr, the smoked-glass casket opened.

Sax and Harper saw the inert body of a young human in his twenties. Wearing a strange white smock, loose cotton trousers, with a black leather belt tied around his midriff and stockinged feet in sandals, the young man was clearly unconscious but alive. His slow, laboured breathing proved that. Sax stared at the young man, noting his attractive face, neat blond hair and well-toned body, and laughed.

‘He’s what we’re here for?’

‘Of course,’ snapped Harper. ‘What were you expecting?’ He looked at the figure and saw a small flap of paper tied to the thonglike belt. Written on the paper were the words:

HELLO. HIS NAME IS CHRIS CWEJ. PLEASE LOOK AFTER HIM AND TAKE HIM TO ST OSCAR'S ON DELLAH. THANK YOU.

On the back was a small symbol that meant nothing to Harper. He shrugged. 'They said that they found him unconscious during a post-battle clean-up expedition. One of the outer colonies. They spent a lot of energy and resources transmatting him here because he had what they were looking for and needed to put stuff inside his mind. That was six months ago. Now the planet has returned during its erratic elliptical orbit, we're to take him back.'

Sax was looking at the complex computer equipment. In particular, a screen, which contained flashing words.

'Hey, Doc, what's a Jithii anyway? This thing says they've been awoken or something.'

The answer came amid a sudden noise that caused Sax and Harper to clutch at their heads in agony. The orange lights began flashing, like a strobe light, and the two humans crashed into each other.

'Let's... let's get away... from here...' Sax screamed.

Harper refused. 'We have a... a job to do... we have to retrieve the receptacle for the Baygent Apotheosis and -'

But then the Jithii found them. The Jithii judged them inappropriate. The Jithii didn't need them.

And so the screaming started.

## AT HOME, AT WORK, AT PLAY

Bernice excused herself from the poker game - at which she was slaughtering a majority of her students quite nicely, thank you - and went into the ladies'. The kids were determined to win their shillings back, despite the fact that few of them really had much flair for cards. And who was she to stop them? Well, apart from their supposedly responsible tutor and rector of Garland College... Ah, what the hell.

The robarman, Charlie X, at the Witch and Whirlwind was keeping them nicely supplied with drink, so who could complain? And - she smiled at this - she had neatly convinced Professor Shingbourne that none of them needed to be in class until one thirty tomorrow afternoon. As her class automatically followed his, she could have a lie in until about three.

Yup, this was the life.

As she wandered to the wash basins, she caught a look at herself in the mirror.

'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the most elegant of all?'

Probably not her, it had to be said. Mind you, as she turned her head one way, then the other, she still looked in pretty good shape. OK, there were the beginnings of dark rims around her eyes, and there were definitely a couple of grey hairs trying to break through her dark crop, but a few hours of good sleep would sort the eyes out and flecks of grey hair looked quite distinguished. She was mid-thirties, looked late twenties and, albeit only sometimes, felt mid-fifties. She had overheard quite a few of the human students (and even a couple of the Ootsoi) comment on how attractive she was, which did wonders for her self-confidence.

After quite a few months here at St Oscar's, Bernice was beginning to feel happily settled in, and quite at peace with herself.

Behind her, reflected in the mirror, the door inched open slightly, but no one came through. It closed again, and she thought nothing of it until something brushed the back of her leg.

'You were supposed to be asleep. You promised you'd stay in the basket.' She put her hands on her hips and looked severely at the cat staring up at her, huge eyes pleading for love and affection. Or food. Cats can't really tell the difference. 'Can't I even pee in peace, young man?'

With a slight mew, Wolsey turned and headed back to the door, but it opened only inward.

'Oh, wait a moment, I won't be long.'

Bernice went into the cubicle and emerged two minutes later to find Wolsey curled up in one of the basins.

'How hygienic. Thank you. Like I can explain cat hair to Charlie X.' She scooped Wolsey's now protesting form out of the basin and deposited him on her shoulder while she washed her hands.

Professor Bernice Summerfield stopped drying her hands and stared harder at the lines, and at the unhealing scars forming a trail across them. 'Too much sun and sand. Too many digs. If I cared half as much for my skin as everyone else tells me I should, it still wouldn't do any good.'

She had been at St Oscar's University on the planet Dellah for nearly six months now. Made a few friends, had some hair-raising adventures, discovered some new facts and still failed to write one single line of her latest book, currently entitled (but more than likely to change for the umpteenth time) *Down Among the Dead Men — Slight Return*, The latest communication from the university's publishing division had succinctly pointed out that she was in breach of contract and they'd like their advance back.

She had called them back again, pointing out that the only way they had of getting that back was to pump her stomach (and half her veins) to remove the various drinks and

foodstuffs the money had gone on. Oh, and the veterinary bill for Wolsey's shots.

Oddly enough, they had accepted this and announced they were preparing the room at the medical centre on the other side of Garland College and would alert her when the date was approaching. Bernice assumed it was a joke. If it wasn't, life might get rather interesting, although Wolsey might not see the funny side of it.

Jason would, though. Jason was like that - the lowlife.

Wolsey jumped down. He had an innate sense that told him when Jason Kane's existence had popped into Bernice's mind, and a stronger one that reminded him that much wailing, gnashing of teeth and a good few personal possessions taking an unexpected flight around their rooms occurred when Jason's name was mentioned.

She had loved Jason very much - which had been quite handy when they had been married - but after the initial fun had faded, so did their ability to coexist. Bernice never doubted that Jason loved her, but he was too much of a wanderer, too easily distracted by other things (often wine, women, song and money, but not always in that order) to really make the commitment they both needed to make.

So they had parted, less than happily, and, although their paths had crossed once or twice, Bernice couldn't shake the feeling that Jason would prefer it if they didn't. And she certainly did. Oh yes. No doubt about that - that man had been washed right outta her hair! In fact, the last time she'd spoken to him, he was clearly mixed up in something that she couldn't identify. It had cost her, oh, at least thirty seconds of sleeplessness before she'd opted for the safer thing of accepting that Jason Kane was Jason Kane and when it suited either of them to look up the other, they would, but until then they had to get on with their lives.

Ready to face the outside world and try to win some of her credits back from Pluse (he was a natural poker player - bastard) and see whether Charlie X had provided her with some decent brandy this evening.

Pushing open the door, she and Wolsey walked straight into a tall, rather gaunt-looking man who appeared to be in his late thirties, but Bernice knew was a good few hundred years older than that.

People on Dellah were strange like that.

‘Hello, Irving. Hang around outside the little girls’ room a lot, do you?’

‘Actually, Professor Summerfield, I was searching for you.’ Irving Braxiatel held an important post within the colleges of St Oscar’s, although each dean, professor and student offered a different explanation of what exactly that post was. He was, nevertheless, one of Bernice’s most interesting friends (bar Wolsey, naturally) on the planet - and, better than that, she actually respected him. Bernice respected very few people, tending to hold much of the universe’s population in a kind of amused contempt, just hoping they would amaze her and break her cynicism. Braxiatel did just that. Not that she entirely trusted him, of course. That would be too simple - far better to regard everyone with a degree of distance. That way no one could ever let you down that much. And he had so many secrets and possibly dodgy, or at least shady, connections that she found herself often comparing him to Jason. Not really very fair on either of them, but at least there wasn’t an ever-present and deeply annoying sexual attraction to Braxiatel, so dealing with him was somewhat easier.

‘There’s a student just arrived. He’s right up your street. Feelings of confusion, displacement, unsure about who to trust or what he’s doing here.’

‘Sounds more like Professor Warrinder, actually.’

‘And look how much you enjoy *his* company,’ Braxiatel said, slipping a glass full - really full - of brandy into her hand.

‘Warrinder is a three-foot-nothing hamster and nutty as a fruitcake. What’s so special about this lad that makes him worth noting?’

Braxiatel pointed to a couple of empty seats, and they sat. Or rather, Bernice and Wolsey sat, Braxiatel giving the cat an

evil look until it lazily jumped down, leaving the second chair for him.

Rather huffily, Wolsey wandered back to where Bernice's students were trying to introduce their new Ootsoi friend, Toosa-eL, to the concept of subterfuge and deceit in order to win at poker. And eL was trying to deal with both Matt Doran and Vitor Pluse trying to smarm their way into her bed. Or nest. Or whatever tall red-feathered avians slept in (how remiss, Bernice Summerfield, not to have found out the answer to that one: lose ten points, do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred pounds).

'Why should I want to mother him?' asked Bernice again, sipping on the quite fabulous brandy. 'And where is this from? Charlie X doesn't stock this.'

'I thought you'd like it. It's a gift from your new charge - I gather that you've met him before. He's one of the Natural Path lot.'

Yeah, Bernice knew about the Natural Path - a heavily religious group, whose strict and quite antiquarian codes and morals not only offended her own but had made life intolerable for those of their society who did not conform.

'Is it Emile?' She had met Emile Mars-Smith a while back - a bit insecure but essentially very nice. Poor lamb had spent so much time trying not to let on he was gay (which she had guessed anyway) and that he was infatuated by an Ursulan anarchist called Scott. The latter effort was particularly difficult because, although Scott had no trouble sleeping with whomever he pleased regardless of race, let alone gender (score one for the anarchists: at least they had no archaic moral codes), he was sleeping with Emile's other friend, another St Oscar's student called Tameka. Tameka, however, had received an extra-special gift from Scott: she had returned to Dellah pregnant. So she had taken special quarters at the university and given birth to a son, whom she had named Jock. Bernice, Tameka and Emile had formed quite a good bond but the last Bernice knew about Emile was what Tameka had told her: that he had headed back to the relay station where his father lived to try to make peace with

his old man. Needless to say Papa Mars-Smith was none too groovy about having a gay son.

‘Yes, that’s him. Not sure if he’s here to learn or find a life partner, actually, but I thought you’d want to help him settle in. I’ve had him placed here at Garland, if you think he’ll fit in all right.’

Bernice did. ‘Hardly a problem here, is it? Hell, if we frowned on every interspecies or same-sex relationship going on in this place, we’d be failing in our duty to be broadminded.’ She threw a look back to Toosa-eL, currently trying to cope with the attentions of the two human lads. ‘Although I suspect young Emile will be slightly better off than the average Ootsoi. Besides, if he’s brought booze as good as this on to this little backwater, he can be my best friend for life.’ Sitting opposite eL, grinning wildly, was Tameka with wee baby Jock strapped to her back, dribbling some probably foul-smelling goo down the rear of his mother’s now traditional black jacket

Braxiatel stood up. ‘I can trust, then, that you won’t let him fall into bad company or dubious scams?’

‘He won’t do anything I wouldn’t do myself first.’

Braxiatel tried to look comforted by that, but failed. ‘Rightio, Benny. I’ll see you later.’

She watched him depart, knocked back the last of the brandy and prepared to get back to the poker game.

Except that someone else was sitting in her place. Closely cropped brown hair, nice cheekbones, dark eyes and rather chubby overall, Emile had arrived.

And Wolsey was seated on his lap, lying on his back having his tummy tickled.

She could hear the purrs from here.

Traitor.

‘I think it’s time we thought about a trip to the vet,’ she said loudly as she walked back to the others. ‘I wonder how his neutering knife is.’

Wolsey stopped purring for a few seconds and gave Bernice a look she swore meant ‘Go on, try it, bitch, and see what



you get in return,’ and then carried on making contented cat noises.

‘Hello, stranger.’

Emile offered his hand a little stiffly. ‘Good to see you again, Professor S.’

Bernice put a hand on his shoulder and turned to the others. ‘Everyone, this is Emile. He’s going to be joining us for a while.’

An assortment of greetings, from an enthusiastic ‘Hiya’ from Vitor Pluse to a grunted ‘Lo’ from Jayne Waspo, welcomed Emile as Bernice introduced the poker players one by one. Tameka just gave him a huge kiss on the lips and probably relished his blushes. ‘Hiya ‘Meel.’

‘Is that...’ Emile pointed at wee Jock.

Tameka nodded. ‘Yeah, Jock. Isn’t he gorgeous?’

Emile was brave, Bernice thought. Jock was, after all, the baby of the man he so desperately wanted to be with. But he suddenly laughed. ‘Green hair or scales yet?’

Tameka shook her head. ‘Scott’s coming to visit soon. I know he’d love to see you again.’

Bernice thought this might be a bit indelicate, so she opted to rescue him.

‘There’s a couple of others not around, but you’ll bump into them sooner or later.’

Emile nodded at her and then let his attention drift to the Ootsoi girl. She was twitching her head back at him, her beak flicking rapidly, as surprised by his amazement as he was by her appearance.

‘You’re beautiful,’ he eventually muttered.

There was a pause, and then eL twittered, ‘Thank you.’

Doran breathed deeply and even Pluse raised an eyebrow. But Emile just continued staring. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be rude, but where are you from?’

‘The Oots Eyrie,’ eL replied. ‘Where are you from?’

‘The Natural Path.’

Bernice immediately felt sorry for him - the shudder that went around the students was visible. Emile shrugged, however. ‘Yeah, my thoughts entirely. That’s why I’m here.’

The others fell quiet, and Emile smiled at Tameka. 'It's good to be back.'

'Heard from Scott?' she said.

Bernice wanted to scream at her! Wasn't she thinking? Damn, what if Scott had abandoned him, or been hostile towards Emile's feelings?

But Emile nodded enthusiastically. 'Yeah, he's still on Ursu, very happy with his lot. I sent a communication to him last week saying I was coming here. He said he'd try to get over some time. He might bring Michael and Leon - apparently they're all getting on all right now, especially with so many of their Eight dead. And Kitzinger's still there, trying to -'

Bernice touched his shoulder. She knew as well as Tameka that Emile Mars-Smith could rabbit on for hours, especially if he was nervous. 'And your father?' Might as well find out now.

'Oh, pathetic and immobile as ever. I'm not welcome back on the relay station and of course he isn't able to come visit me in case his soul gets corrupted by the ills of the outside world. One day one of us will get our act together and sort things out, but for now I thought I'd head back here, find you two and have some fun. If that's all right.'

Bernice clapped her hands, which made eL jump slightly. 'All right? It's marvellous. I'm glad you chose here to come to. Now, take your things to my room - we'll find you somewhere in the dorm tomorrow. Tameka, will you show him the way?'

'Sure, boss.' Tameka slipped her arm through Emile's, pulling him closer to her. 'Welcome back to Garland College. I've missed you.'

Emile squeezed her arm in return. 'Me too.' With a last, bemused look at eL, he allowed Tameka to guide him away.

Bernice sighed. 'I think that's all the excitement I need for one night, guys. I'm going to do a bit of research in the secretary's office and then call it a night. Tomorrow, we've got a couple of lengthy classes, so I suggest you don't stay up too late, OK?'

‘Yes, Miss Summerfield,’ they chorused sarcastically, like a class of six-year-olds (except eL, who again nearly shed some feathers in surprise at their unified shout).

She glared at them. ‘You’ve been waiting months for an opportunity to do that, haven’t you?’

‘Yes, Miss Summerfield,’ they said again.

‘Right, two can play at that game.’ She looked over to the robarman. ‘Charlie. No more for this lot after nine thirty. OK?’

‘Yes, Miss Summerfield,’ Charlie X replied.

Muttering things about conspiracies, bringing back corporal punishment and the effects of cloudy days on solar-powered robot barkeepers, Bernice went on her way.

Bernice was not entirely sure what woke her the following morning. It might have been Wolsey, doing his usual morning routine of tapping her chin, wanting his bickies and mewing helplessly like a week-old kitten desperate for affection (and it worked nearly every time); or it might have been the snoring of the attractive young student with whom she had shared her bed last night.

Wait a minute!

Professors at St Oscar’s did not, as a rule, shag students. Bad example and all that. Besides, she didn’t recall having sex with anyone last night.

She sat up and nudged her snoring companion. He lazily rolled over, placing an arm around her tummy and squeezing slightly. Bernice sighed. Loudly. And then coughed. A bit louder.

The student woke. She watched as his eyes popped open and absorbed the reality of where his hand - and indeed the rest of his body - was.

‘Oh, no,’ he murmured quietly. ‘Professor S, if I close my eyes, will I wake up and not be here?’

‘Unlikely, chum.’ Bernice waited until his eyes screwed tightly shut and she hauled herself out of the bed, yanked her dressing gown up off an easy chair and wrapped herself

in it. 'All right, young man, the naked lady is decent. You may look now.'

He did as bidden. 'Sorry,' he muttered.

Bernice looked across at the chaise longue, where a duvet had flopped to the floor, leaving an unsuspecting pillow there, on to which Wolsey had decided to settle, aware that bickies were a while off.

'Not comfortable on the sofa, young man?'

Emile still didn't want to keep his eyes open. 'I was cold.'

Bernice licked her finger and held it up. 'Ambient temperature about twenty-two degrees, Emile. Not cold.'

'Uncomfortable?' Emile sat up, pulling Bernice's duvet close to his neck.

'Uh-uh. Professor Dok slept on that once. And he's a silicon-based life form, immovable. Even he found it comfortable.' Bernice stared at Wolsey.

'Cat disturb you, perhaps?'

Emile, clearly seeing an opportunity, jumped at it. 'Yes. Wolsey. His fault.'

Wolsey, apparently knowing that his name was being taken in vain, mewed loudly and, if cats could be said to glare, gave Emile a look that should have dropped him at twenty paces.

Emile mouthed a 'sorry' at Wolsey, but the cat was having none of it, turned away and ended up staring at the kitchen door.

Bernice went in and quickly came out with a bowl of biscuits and a sachet of watered-down milk which she gave him. Wolsey lazily got off the pillow, jumped to the floor and took up his usual and-about-bloody-time-too pose as he ate.

'Are you decent?' Bernice asked.

Emile nodded. 'Well, get up then. Any second now, we're going to be disturbed by Joseph and I don't want him getting the wrong idea about us. You know how these mechanoid porters like to gossip.'

Emile laughed. 'Hey, I can tell them it's the first time I've slept in a bed with a woman since I was nine.'

'Yeah, right.' Bernice stood up. 'D'you want the shower first? Then I'll try to find a room for you. Near me and Tameka, OK?'

Emile nodded. "That'd be great," he said jumping out of bed. 'And thank you, Professor S.'

'Bernice. Benny, remember?'

'Benny. Thank you.' As Emile headed towards the shower room, the door chimed and then opened as the small white sphere known as Joseph floated in, delivering an electronic reader into Bernice's hands. 'Morning, Rector. Today's *Campus Bulletin* for you.'

'Thank you, Joseph. Are any of the rooms on this floor vacant at the moment?'

Joseph hovered a bit, whirred and then circled around her, rotating on his own internal axis while doing so, a manoeuvre that simultaneously reminded Bernice of an owl's head and made her nauseous.

'Is there something amiss with your set of rooms, Rector? It is not unduly cramped in here, although I believe if you left the bicycle contraption in the Porters' Lodge, you would have more room for your Professor Nightshade figure.' Joseph was hovering above the offending bike and life-size cardboard cutout of the popular, mid-twentieth-century television character, which Bernice had rescued from a closing-down video shop in 2006 when the VHS boom had collapsed in on itself and Earth culture had made the change to video CDs.

Bernice had had this argument with Joseph before – the bike was staying put. Anyway, this wasn't about her space. Or her possessions.

'Actually, it's about my friend Emile Mars-Smith,' she said. 'He needs somewhere to stay.'

Joseph hovered above the chaise longue and then the double bed, lowering himself to the duvet and then up again. 'Not going to work out then, Rector?'

'Emile is a friend, Joseph, nothing more. Not, I might add, that it's any of your business. He's a young man looking for love, self-worth, identity and some adventure.'

‘What’s he doing as a student in this college, then?’ buzzed Joseph, swiftly zooming out of Bernice’s rooms with a passing electronic squawk of ‘I’ll see what I can do, Rector,’ before departing to wherever mechanoid porters went every morning. (One day, Bernice decided, she’d follow him to see where he went. But, with Joseph’s irritating programming, he’d probably deliberately lead her on a wild-goose chase.)

She picked up the electronic newspaper Joseph had brought in and began scanning.

‘Oh, no,’ she said as one particular news item appeared. ‘Oh, damn and blast it.’

*‘Hi, this is DNN, bringing you all the Dellah news from the planet and beyond. I’m Jake Garrett.*

*‘News fresh in from the outer rim worlds - the expedition to investigate the planet Ardethe, apparently home of the legendary Ardetheans, has seemingly hit trouble.*

*‘Despite repeated calls, no signals have been received from either the archaeological party on the planet’s surface, or the AMSTrigan, which was the expedition’s support ship.*

*‘Admin-Proctor Lucinda Vrana, herself on the way to join the team and learn what had been discovered, has given this statement while aboard the Administration’s flagship, the AMS Horatio.*

*“We are most concerned with this piece of news and until communication is restored, we see nothing to be gained by trying to locate them when there are better ships more qualified to search. We will of course sit and wait with bated breath for more news.”*

*‘Back on System Central, the Admin-Proctor’s opponents are making political capital out of this, on the eve of some of the most important elections in Administration history. DNN reporter Linzi Guudbimps spoke to Hardline Karllist Movement leader Gol Hazchem about this latest incident.*

*‘ “Yeah, right, I mean, like once again, we’re seeing Vrana making headlines out of this tragedy. And, yeah, like we know it’s a tragedy because, hey, sure the Ardetheans might have come back to life and struck everyone down but, well, it’s not*

*what this universe needs, no? It needs strong, demanding leadership that I and the Hardline Karllist Move- “*

*‘That was Gol Hazchem on the Admin-Proctor’s stance over the Ardethe tragedy. The Admin-Proctor has, we are told, now turned her attention to the worsening situation on Solaados, where a number of terrorists are fighting the mining companies the Administration established there.*

*‘Coming up later — Professor Proot on why Gregori Glaast’s latest masterpiece, the Requiem Suite, could be the end of classical music as we know it. And, in the light of the Orion war, why some AMS crewmen are nervous about serving under android captains. Plus the views on one android captain and why he married a human woman. Was it for career furtherment or do synthetics really have emotions? That’s all coming up later.*

*‘And that was DNN, bringing you all the Dellah news from the planet and beyond. I’m Jake Garrett.’*

Irving Braxiatel switched the hologram recording off.

‘That was broadcast about three hours ago. Bad news.’

Bernice nodded, and drained her teacup. ‘Do you think Pierce and the others are dead?’

Braxiatel looked at Bernice. Very hard. ‘Of course I do. And so do you. Especially if what we suspect is true.’

Bernice sighed and placed her cup on a hovering table, which then scuttled off to the kitchen. ‘We don’t know anything for sure. It might really have been Ardethe.’

Braxiatel held up two data crystals, then passed them to Bernice. ‘This -’ he pointed at one ‘- was the set of coordinates Pierce gave everyone for Ardethe. Stupid and impulsive he may have been, especially to go off without the rest of us, but he was neat and tidy. He entrusted... ah, a friend with this data.’

Bernice opted not to ask about the ‘friend’ - Braxiatel, she had learnt, had some dodgy friends in even dodgier high places.

‘This -’ Braxiatel tapped the other crystal ‘- is where those of us concerned with such things believe he really went.’

‘Did he know?’

‘Unlikely. Why should he? It is supposed to be a nine-planet system. A tenth shows up. Who’s to know which is the anomaly?’

‘A good scientist asks such questions, Irving. We both know that.’

‘Jakson Pierce was not a good scientist, Benny. We both know *that*.’

Bernice nodded in agreement. ‘So what now, Irving? You and me? Off to Ardethe, or the planet Pierce thought was Ardethe, which might be Ardethe anyway?’

Braxiatel smiled. ‘I’m not going anywhere, Professor Summerfield. I have a course to teach. But if you want to head there and investigate what our sources believe this world to be, then do so.’

‘Am I covered?’

‘Doctor Archduke knows what we are planning. I’m fairly certain he will arrange for you to be looked after.’

Bernice raised her eyebrows. ‘Doctor Ferdinand Archduke is not, to be frank, number one on my list of people to trust. He is *one* of them, after all.’

Braxiatel shook his head. ‘We are not entirely sure of that, my dear Professor. And even if he is, he has had plenty of opportunities to stop our little investigations but he hasn’t.’

Bernice stood up. ‘And that, my dear Professor Braxiatel, frightens me more than anything else.’ She turned to go. ‘Oh, by the way, I might take Emile with me. He wants some adventure and he’s seen a bit of action. This might do him some good.’

‘As you wish, Professor. You’re the rector of his college - he’s under your jurisdiction now.’

Bernice leant against the door. ‘You know, that would sound so much nicer if I didn’t feel that you thought I’d just signed his death warrant. And mine, come to that.’

Braxiatel smiled, but only slightly. ‘I know he’s in good hands, Benny.’

‘Yeah, right. We’ll leave tomorrow noon. I assume you took my acceptance for granted and arranged a ship.’



Braxiatel nodded. 'A spice-freighter captain owed me a favour or two. A shuttle will take you to the spaceport in orbit tomorrow lunchtime. There you'll pick up the *Modesty Plays* and be on your way to the rim worlds.'

Bernice smiled her farewell. 'See you in the bar tonight?'

But Braxiatel declined. 'I have a few other things to see to, but I will meet you tomorrow at just before noon.'

'Well, this is weird.'

Emile stared at the small ball hovering in front of him. It was no bigger than a snooker ball, pure white, and, while it hovered, it rotated; although, with no distinguishing marks on it, it took a while to realize it was doing so. It gave off a slight humming noise while it hovered, but a high-pitched buzz when it actually swooped around, which it did with an alarming speed and at unexpected moments, as if it was enjoying confusing him.

'What exactly do you do here?' Emile was not unfamiliar with technology, but talking snooker balls were something else.

'I am Joseph,' it replied, in a calm, well-mannered, cultured, plummy voice that reminded Emile of the uptight, repressed pastors back on the relay station. 'I am a porter. I am the porter for this block and I work for the Rector, Professor Summerfield.'

'Oh, good. Does she treat you well?'

'She is an efficient if somewhat... unorthodox rector of Garland College. Compared with her predecessor, however, she is remarkably pleasant.'

Emile was in his new room now, sitting on a wicker chair by a large window. There was a bed, a desk with a computer on it, some shelves and a wardrobe. To one side was a tiny kitchen area and a shower room.

'What happened to her predecessor?'

There was a slight buzz and Joseph zoomed to the window, rotated a couple of times and then came down to hover at eye level with Emile.

‘He had an accident. Electrocuted. In the shower. Involving a food mixer and an electronic razor.’

Emile frowned. ‘But surely all that kind of thing is overseen by the porters? How did he get electrocuted when your safety cut-outs should have alerted you to that problem?’

Joseph began moving away, then, with a final spin, he said, as calmly as always, ‘People should never be rude to porters, you know, Student Emile. Remember that, and your time at Garland College will be very pleasant indeed.’ With a final loud buzz, Joseph was gone.

Leaving Emile to think about offended machines, showers and electronic razors. He looked out of the window, ignoring the beautiful lawns, wonderful architecture and heaps of people of various sizes, shapes and colours. He looked into the cloudless blue midday sky and, for the first time, wondered what his father was doing.

*‘Hi, this is DNN, bringing you all the Dellah news from the planet and beyond. I’m Jake Garrett.*

*‘New this broadcast - confirmation that the AMS Trigan was destroyed in an unexplained incident while in orbit around a planet that some have speculated may or may not be the legendary Ardethe.*

*‘AMS Administration, part of the Earthspace Administration, have confirmed that a log buoy located by a System News Network team, was from the doomed ship and ejected shortly before its destruction, presumably with the loss of all aboard. The trajectory of the buoy and the lack of transponder signal are indicative of the ship’s destruction. AMS Administration cannot confirm the destruction of the ship, however, despite the overwhelming evidence in support of this theory.*

*‘Admin-Proctor Lucinda Vrana, currently on a goodwill tour of the Solaados colony, had this to say:*

*“Obviously this news is distressing but I feel nothing should be set in stone until proof is provided that the Trigan has not merely encountered transmission difficulties.”*

*‘When asked if another ship would be sent to the rim to investigate, the Admin-Proctor explained:*

*“That is a decision that needs to be placed before the AMS Administration.”*

*‘DNN will of course bring you more updates on this story as and when they happen. In the meantime this is DNN bringing you all the Dellah news from the planet and beyond. I’m Jake Garrett.’*

Emile found Bernice Summerfield at the Witch and Whirlwind, pretty much as he expected to. Well, apart from the heavily inebriated bit - surely rectors, professors and general standard-setting people weren’t supposed to get ratarised with their students, especially when slaughtering them at poker. Tameka wasn’t there - it was probably time to put Jock to bed. And Tameka was clearly enjoying motherhood enough to stay with him.

And Scott, should he arrive - would he stay with her?

No, Emile, you put that kind of rubbish out of your head. You’re here to get back on track. Scott is the past, and it was fun but now it’s time to grow up. Be friends, nothing more.

‘D’you play, Emile?’ shouted Vitor Pluse, waving to an empty seat. ‘Please say you do - we need someone else to even the odds.’

‘Professor Summerfield taught us this game,’ added Marjorie Marjorie, ‘but never let on that she was some kind of grand master.’

‘I still do not understand it,’ tweeted eL, and Doran, sitting very close beside her, touched her right talons gently.

‘It’ll all make sense eventually.’

‘Earlier she shouted “rummy” far too loudly,’ Waspo whispered in Emile’s ear. ‘To make matters worse, in the next game she declared she was fishing. Even the professor didn’t get that until eL bellowed “mahjong” two goes later.’

Emile, who couldn’t imagine eL bellowing anything, nodded quietly. ‘I’ll give it a go,’ he said.

Pluse dealt him in - seven-card stud with one-eyed Knaves wild.

The first two cards, the face-down ones, were an Eight of Hearts and a Six of Hearts. The face-up was a Ten of

Diamonds. Bernice already had a Knave of Spades, which meant she automatically had a pair of whatever was highest in her hands.

'Vegas rules,' she muttered. As no one else knew anything different, they agreed, which meant she started the bidding.

Another round of dealings then happened, giving Bernice a King of Hearts and therefore a high-scoring pair. Emile frowned at this, wondering if she had a third. As the betting began anew, Marjorie folded early, leaving Pluse, eL, Waspo and Emile to beat Bernice. Poker is the most un-team card game possible, Emile thought, but here they were ganging up on Benny without even talking about it.

And he could see that Bernice knew this - and enjoyed it.

Bernice chucked in a high bid of thirty shillings - eL promptly folded, but Pluse just smiled and met it. Emile matched it and Waspo upped it slightly. A further round of shillings went into the pot until Waspo had been matched and a fifth card was dealt - Emile now holding a Three of Hearts and a Seven of Clubs in addition to his concealed Hearts and the Ten of Diamonds. On the next betting, Pluse folded and so Waspo and Emile stared at each other, each trying to read something in the other's face. Bernice was just stony-faced, betraying nothing. On the sixth deal, Emile got a Queen of Hearts, which caused a raised eyebrow from Waspo as she received her second Four, giving her an obvious pair. Bernice got a King of Spades, giving her a minimum three of a kind with the wild Knave.

What the hell, Emile decided, as Bernice put in a medium bet. Waspo upped it and Emile met her new bid. The last cards went round, face down. Emile's was an Ace of Hearts - giving him a flush.

Bernice was still the first to bet and surprisingly made quite a small one, which Waspo immediately upped. Emile matched it - and Bernice did as well.

'You've been seen,' Bernice said to Waspo, who put down a straight - a run from five to nine. Bernice dropped down her two Kings and her Knave - three of a kind.

Emile laughed and put down his flush, to a whoop of delight from Pluse, which in turn elicited an alarmed shriek from eL, who appeared to think Pluse was angry or something.

Bernice pushed the rather large pot towards the winner. 'Should buy you a few beers.' She smiled at him. 'Make sure I get to have one sometime.'

Emile suddenly felt himself grin. He was... well, happy. These people had made him feel very welcome over something as simple as a card game. For the first time in months, he actually wanted to stick around people, this group being especially fun - even Waspo with her perpetual grumbles.

A young lad jogged over - tight vest displaying some nice musculature underneath, tight pants outlining... well, Emile was pleased to see that he didn't need his imagination so much here. Back home everyone wore such dowdy grey clothing.

The lad caught Emile's eye, and he smiled - slightly. Well, it might have been a smile; it could just have been a twitch. But no, Emile wanted it to be a smile, so that's what it would be.

The newcomer passed a couple of circular crystals to Bernice and dashed off, again casting a look towards Emile.

Why?

And why was Emile wondering why? Hell, he was the first attractive person he'd seen on the planet. Why not go and talk to him?

Because he'd gone, that was why. Damn.

'Who was that?' he asked Marjorie without thinking about it.

'Why?' she replied.

Pluse leant over, 'Day I Laratt,' he answered. 'Nice guy, studies Euterpian music theory and history. Do you want an intro?'

Emile wanted to say yes, but instead mumbled something about how he was just wondering and, well, no thanks but perhaps some other time but only if it was convenient and there was no hurry really. Honest.

Emile switched his attention to Bernice and her crystals. He had seen a lot of these and realized quite quickly it was some kind of electronic letter, although he'd never seen how anyone read one. Hell, back on the relay station, letters from outside were considered one down from praying to the Devil.

As if reading his mind, Bernice pulled a small electronic datapad from her chinos and shoved a crystal into the top.

Immediately a small hologram of a man wobbled into existence.

'Hiya, Professor. Popping by Dellah soon, because I need some supplies. Thought we could have a drink. Ciao.'

'Over my dead body,' Bernice said, yanking the crystal out and dropping it into her beer glass. 'Hope you drown.'

She placed the second crystal into the reading device. The same hologram appeared.

'Hi honey, I'm home,' it said.

'Hi honey, I'm home,' said a closer male voice. 'Typical postal service in this part of the galaxy. Sent them a week apart and you get them together.'

Emile watched as a young man, about Bernice's age, walked across from the doorway of the bar, walked up behind Bernice, kissed her on the top of her head and waved to the robarman.

'Scotch, neat. Double.' A flying platter brought one over in a few seconds.

'What d'you want?' Bernice clearly was not pleased to see the newcomer. But Emile was - it was a man whose life he'd once saved when they fought the Sunless together. When Emile had met Bernice, Tameka and Scott for the first time. The man was Jason Kane and Emile liked him a lot. He was Fun with a capital F and, although Jason and Bernice seemed hot to get along (he couldn't remember if they were divorced or just separated now), Emile sort of hoped maybe they would get back together. Maybe that's what Jason was here to discuss.

He was dressed as usual in a badly scuffed brown leather jacket with a furry collar, and black trousers, and he had a few days' worth of mousy stubble on his chin. Emile thought

his eyes were still among the most interesting he'd ever seen. And far more lively and exciting than his scruffy appearance suggested. He was about six foot, maybe a touch more, well built and had very rough hands.

'And hello to you, too.' He looked at the others around the table. 'Hiya, kids. Teacher being good to you all?'

Bernice closed her eyes, and let out a deep breath. When she opened them, a forced smile was on her lips. 'Everybody, this is Jason Kane. Jason, this is everybody. Now piss off and leave us alone.'

Jason ignored her and smiled at the group. 'Hard to believe, I know, but I'm Benny's husband.'

'Ex-husband,' she corrected him, rather quickly.

Only Marjorie seemed astonished at this news, although Waspo might just as well have had 'distaste' etched in permanent ink all over her face.

Pluse reached across and shook Jason Kane's hand. 'Pleased to meet you, sir.'

'Well, you shouldn't be,' grunted Bernice.

With a look of apology at Bernice, who just glared back, Emile also offered his hand. 'Hello, Jason. I don't know if you remember

Jason raised an eyebrow. 'Emile? Hi, good to see you. Christ, poor you. What made you come to a dump like this?'

Emile was about to answer when Bernice suddenly tugged at Jason's collar, dragging his face before hers. 'Listen you - I said piss off and I meant it. What do you have to keep turning up in my life for anyway? Aren't you supposed to be ensconced in some dodgy project that lowlifes like you get involved in after too many nights in the casino?'

Jason smiled. 'That's what I love about you, Benny. Always there with a welcoming smile and kind words. And there was me thinking that this place might have blunted your edge.' He moved up a little so that his mouth was level with Bernice's ear.

'I keep hearing interesting things about certain rim worlds - Ardethe gets mentioned a lot. I thought that would prick up your ears in no time. Surprised to find you here.'

Bernice *just* stared ahead. 'If you thought I was there, *you* wouldn't be here. What d'you want, Jase?'

'Ten minutes of your time. Alone.'

'You've got it. The clock is ticking, now walk me to my room.'

Emile watched as the ex-couple walked out of the bar, and let out the breath he had been holding.

'I think those two get worse instead of better as they get older. At least the last time I saw them together they were capable of being polite to each other.' He stood and grabbed a handful of his winnings, ensuring he got at least what he had put in plus a little extra. 'Buy a round with this lot, will you, Vitor,' he said and walked out, following the direction taken by Bernice and Jason.

He could see them a few yards ahead, talking animatedly.

'We're being followed,' said Jason. 'The new kid on the block.'

Bernice shrugged. 'Emile's OK. Why're you interested in Ardethe?'

Jason scratched his eyebrow, a habit, or rather an affectation, Bernice had seen him develop that meant he was pretending to be mysterious. 'Certain people I am... familiar with have an interest in it. Ardethe, if it really is Ardethe, is supposed to be a treasure trove. My associates would like to be part of any, well, archaeological trip there.'

'You've seen the newscasts, Jase. The party already there are dead. Probably.' Bernice stopped walking. 'What makes you think I'm going to go chasing after ghosts?'

'Because it's the sort of thing you do these days. You'd get data on the planet, best places to look, that sort of thing.'

Bernice shook her head. 'Go away, Jason. You're not coming with me, and that's final.'

Jason suddenly grabbed her shoulders and kissed her on the lips, pulling her to him. Bernice squirmed and pulled away, wondering why she hadn't just kneed him in the groin. 'What the bloody hell was that?'

Jason just stared at her, firmly gazing into her eyes. 'Just in case you don't come back. Please do.'



Bernice wiped her mouth. 'You ever do that again, and you'll be wearing your bollocks on a chain around your neck to remind yourself of what you once had.'

He held his hands out, suggesting contrition. 'OK, sorry. I'll get my supplies and go. See you around?'

'Yeah, I imagine we'll bump into each other. I mean, it's an infinite universe but somehow, just somehow, Jason Kane and Bernice Summerfield manage to trip over one another wherever we go.'

Jason bowed slightly and walked off. Bernice watched him go and then became aware of Emile standing at her shoulder.

'Yes?'

'You really love each other, don't you?' Emile shook his head slowly. 'It's so sad that you don't like each other.'

Bernice said nothing to give away her surprise at that suggestion, just stood as Jason walked away, followed by Emile.

*'Hi, this is DNN, bringing you all the Dellah news from the planet and beyond. I'm Jake Garrett.'*

*'Admin-Proctor Lucinda Vrana has announced that the rim worlds around the so-called planet Ardethe are to be patrolled by AMS forces to stop raiders, pirates and other antisocial opportunists trying to discover the fate of the AMS Trigan, now missing for twenty-eight hours, presumed destroyed. The Admin-Proctor released this statement earlier this evening.'*

*"I don't think it would be safe for anyone to go there until the Administration has fully investigated the area."*

*'In three days Lucinda Vrana will be casting her vote in the Administration election, hoping to ensure her return to office for a third term. But with the crisis on Solaados worsening, despite her presence there, the continuing blockade of Throxill by the Congress of Galactic Ecologists flotilla led by former Administrator Posedor aboard the Future Hope - one of Vrana's own staff a few years ago — and the unofficial strike by the Loaders' and Movers' Union regarding the rights of android crews are all problems that her opponents are claiming the Admin-Proctor has failed to deal with.'*

*‘Tomorrow evening, DNN Tonight will be bringing you a profile of this most contentious of Administration leaders, possibly the most controversial woman in power since “Mad Mags” took Earth to the brink of nuclear annihilation nearly six hundred years ago.*

*‘In the meantime, coming up next: a profile of noted researcher into viral infections Doctor Aynn Kranten, who died yesterday in a shuttle accident on Calfadoria, where she had been running the Cal 2 facility for eight years. Colleagues and former patients will be paying tribute to this much-missed member of the fraternity. Also, a report on where best to get UV-free suntans this year, which holovid characters your nephews and nieces will want for Christmas and, of course, all the weather in your system. And after that: how you can get a free model kit of the newest ship in the fleet, the AMS Sithnar, which launches tomorrow in Solaadon space.*

*‘This is DNN, bringing you all the Dellah news from the planet and beyond. I’m Jake Garrett.’*

It was a heap, no two ways about it. Whatever gods protected it, they were pretty nice ones who clearly cared a lot about Jason Kane. By rights, it looked as if it should not even get off the ground. OK, so Emile was not exactly the System’s greatest explorer himself but over the years he’d seen a few ships and none of them looked quite so much like a decaying wreck as this thing.

‘Does it actually fly?’ he called out.

Jason stuck his head out of the doorway. ‘Did someone speak?’

‘Just me. Emile, remember? The one person who was pleased to see you at the bar.’

‘Oh, right. Hang on a sec, I’m just finishing off checking that the bots loaded my stuff, then I’ll come and say a proper hello. OK?’

‘Fine. Whatever.’ Emile walked closer. The hull of the ship was pitted and pockmarked. Surely if there was a leak in space, Jason would die. And this metal ship looked as if one

swift kick would reduce it to more pieces than Emile's dead mother's kitchen drawer had cutlery.

On the underside was scorched a name - *Mother Fist* - which looked like it had been done with a blowtorch. A series of numbers were there as well, but most of them had been deliberately obliterated by the same blowtorch.

'Numbers are so impersonal,' said Jason suddenly behind him.

Emile moved with a start and bashed his head on the bottom of *Mother Fist*.

'I prefer names - they make a craft far more... real. Far more yours, you understand?'

Emile was clutching his head, convinced he was bleeding to death. 'Yes, whatever,' he said through gritted teeth.

Jason ignored this. 'I won her in a game of Twister. The original owner didn't have a nose to touch with his inside leg, so I won by default. Of course, I set the rules and came up with the game, but it was too late for him to argue by then.'

'I don't know what Twister is.' Emile had discovered that his crown had not split open, and slowly stood upright again. 'But it sounds fun.'

'God, I thought even this dreary place had learnt the art of Twister. Benny was always good at it. I could never work out whether she enjoyed the winning or just the actual twisting - but games did tend to go on a few hours.'

'I never asked before, Jason. Were you married long?'

'Not really. Long enough to get to know each other, not long enough to get bored.'

Emile nodded, and promptly wished he hadn't. 'Why'd you split up?'

'Ah, that's a long story, very messy, very unpleasant, and it dragged a lot of other people into the tale who really had no rhyme or reason to be dragged in. Anyway, it's over and that's that.' Jason held his hand out to Emile. 'Good to meet you again, Emile. But you have my sympathies for being stuck here.'

'Take me with you then.' He said it without thinking, without even meaning to. It had just come straight out, like

some kind of instinctive reaction. 'I mean... well, yeah, take me with you. I don't want to be stuck here. I mean Bernice is great and those others are all right, but I'm bored. I want to see stars and other planets. I want to... well, go places, I s'pose.'

'Uh-uh. It might look a big enough ship, but it's carrying lots of cargo, and I prefer my own company.'

'Yeah, I bet you do. No one to argue with, no one to bicker with, no one to tell you to wash your socks.' Emile folded his arms. 'And, of course, no one to boast to about how clever you were nicking that little bag of data crystals from Bernice's back pocket when you kissed her.'

Jason frowned.

Emile suddenly grabbed Jason's arm, until it was pulled away. 'Oh, go on, Jason. Just a quick trip.'

'You know,' started Jason, putting an arm around Emile's shoulder, 'I'm probably going to regret this, but OK. One trip. Only. Then back here.'

'I'd better tell Bernice...' Emile started, but Jason grabbed him and pushed him towards the door of *Mother Fist*.

'Oh, no - firstly, she'll stop you, and secondly, by now, she'll know I've nicked her data crystal with the Ardethe information on. And we'll never hear the end of it.'

\* \* \*

'Do you know what that arse-brained, git-headed, pillock-brained toss-pot has done?'

Bernice Summerfield threw herself into Braxiatel's favourite armchair, and kicked backwards at it. Twice.

'I assume,' Braxiatel said, placing a mug of tea beside her, 'that we are talking about your former betrothed. One Mr Jason Kane? I heard he was here.'

'Irving, he stole the bloody data crystal you gave me. He's going there now, to plunder the place for whatever twisted ends he's got.'

Braxiatel sat opposite her, and wondered how Bernice's bike had managed to get up the steps and through his door, with Wolsey asleep in the basket on the front.

‘Bernice, please tell me you are talking about the Ardethean information. I imagine someone like Jason would want a head start there. I hear he’s involved with some, well, interesting people these days.’

‘Oh, bugger them, Irving. No, I bet the little bastard swiped what he thought was the Ardethe information. But what he’s also got, and no doubt what he’s going to stick in his bloody navcomputer, are the details of the planet Jakson Pierce and the *Trigan* crew actually landed on.’

Braxiatel nodded as he digested all this. ‘Oh, dear. That is not good news, I’m afraid.’ He stirred his own mug of tea with a pen. ‘Did your husband ever write a will?’

‘A what? Oh, I don’t know. Why?’

Braxiatel bit his bottom lip. ‘Well, I think you’re probably about to become a beneficiary to his estate. Because if what we think is *really* on that planet is really on that planet, Jason Kane is going to die.’

Oddly enough, this didn’t make Bernice feel very good.

## TRYOUTS FOR THE HUMAN RACE

‘How long have you been in service, Blummer?’

Ryne knew the answer, of course. Everyone did - Blummer had been in service ‘all my blasted life’. He just asked the question to help pass the time.

‘All my blasted life,’ came the gruff reply from the inspection hatch below. There was a sudden shower of sparks and a loud curse. ‘All my blasted life and they still can’t make these so-called access panels accessible.’

Blummer’s very round and follicularly challenged head popped up from the hatchway. ‘Why, lad?’

Ryne shrugged. ‘Well, it’s these flashing lights, you see, Blummer. Ever since I joined the service, I’ve wondered why the flight deck has so many flashing lights. I mean, look over there. That lot. Green then red then green then red then

‘Is there a point to this, lad? I’ve got important work to do down here.’

Ryne nodded. ‘Yeah, I want to know why whoever designs huge great space hulks like this thing builds so many pointless flashing lights into everything. If you’ve been in service so long, you must know what the flashing lights mean.’

Blummer frowned at him, a frown that said, without the need for words, It’s not our place to worry about such things, lad. And he vanished again into the hatchway.

Ryne yelled after him. ‘Of course it’s our place. One of them lights goes phut, and we have to replace it. I’d like to know what I’m replacing. And why!’

Blummer’s reply was distorted, coming as it did from beneath a few feet of steel bulkhead. ‘They never go phut,

lad. In all my years of service, I've not seen one go phut. Ever.'

Ryne sighed dramatically. 'Why can't you just say, "I don't know, Ryne lad - beats me every time"? But no, we have to get, "It's not for the likes of us to ask questions, just get on and do the job." Typical.'

'Besides,' came the grunt from below. 'It's not for the likes of us to ask questions. We just have to get on and do our job.'

Ryne made a V-sign to where he knew Blummer was.

Behind him, there was a loud bang and a fizzing and phutting noise and one of the flashing banks of lights went out.

'Oh, no.' Naturally, life support didn't fail, the ship didn't suddenly career off in a different path and the shuttle didn't eject itself. But, aware that somewhere, deep down, someone must have had a reason for ranging bank after bank of flashing lights in the flight deck and, logically, they probably did indicate something, Ryne yelled down to Blummer.

'One of them light sets has gone phut, Blummer!'

Blummer's head re-emerged a few seconds later. 'By heck, lad, you don't half try my patience.'

'It's not me, Blummer, it's them lights. Look.' Ryne pointed to the blanked-out bank, a slight smell of smouldering electrics in the air.

'Well, I'll go to the foot of our stairs,' Blummer exclaimed esoterically. 'I've not seen that before.'

'I know,' said Ryne. 'I know, you told me. But it's happened, hasn't it? What will you do?'

'Me, lad? Why me? I'm already trying to sort out why the navcom pods have gone bust. You try and mend them lights.'

'Me? How? How do I do that? You won't never let me touch the toolbox, let alone actually learn how to do maintenance round here.'

Blummer sighed, and tapped his head. 'Use your intelligence, lad. Ask the computer.' He vanished again, although Ryne could hear muttered grumbles and assumed they had to be about him.

They'd been assigned to this ship three months ago, when Ryne had passed his Administration Prison Service exams and hoped to work as a navigation officer (junior class) on one of the big space liners. The *Hyperion II* or that spanking new *Empress VII*. But no, he'd been assigned to the prison service, lugging scavenger crews about and not being allowed to talk to anyone except Blummer for months on end.

There was the pilot, of course, but he didn't say too much these days. Once upon a time, he'd been a captain in the old Space Fleet, back during the Galactic Wars, but his ship had been destroyed along with all his crew. When the System Administration took control, the pilot was officially court-martialled and released from hospital. Of course, with no legs, only one arm and a chunk of bulkhead that had lobotomized him when it had drilled itself into his forehead, he'd been unsurprisingly reluctant to leave the hospital. Indeed, he'd just sat and dribbled his way through the court martial, through the reading of his new rights as a normal citizen and his discharge from the medical centre. No one even remembered what his name was, but, as he was clogging up the hospital corridors, it was decided to re-enlist him under the Administration's new cyborg programme. The poor old git was grafted into the pilot's cockpit. Cyborg limbs that were actually part of the cabin were fused on to his body and his good arm had been removed, to be replaced with a cybernetic one similar to his original replacement, similarly fused into the controls.

Programmed in advance with mission briefs, the pilot sat for months on end, his body fed with yukky-looking nutrient tubes, and drove the ship wherever it was supposed to go. All Ryne had to do was check the navigation route, alert the pilot to unexpected asteroid fields, stupid skimmer ships crashing out of hyperlight drive without advance warnings, and ensure that any drift was compensated for. This meant that, while Ryne felt he had total responsibility for the ship, in fact if anything went wrong, it would be the pilot's fault and he could be court-martialled. Again.



Nominally, Blummer was the co-pilot, but all he did was talk to his one-eyed cat, Smokey (who, Ryne was sure, regulations would have banned if they knew he was aboard). As co-pilot, Blummer was actually there to ensure the ship didn't fall apart at the slightest gravitational flux or burnout of the engine core, or if one of the prisoners suddenly opened an airlock and spaced themselves (not uncommon apparently).

This meant that, despite the fact he did very little, Blummer was actually Ryne's superior officer, which Ryne found very annoying indeed.

Blummer was all right really - he talked too much and all the guys back at PS had warned him that Blummer was full of stories spanning his forty years of service, most of them bullshit and all of them boring. But Ryne had actually found himself liking the fat old twazzock despite everything and suspected that the feelings were mutual. At least Blummer hadn't really shouted at him over anything.

Which meant there was only one bone of contention between them.

Smokey the cat wandered on to the flight deck, obviously bored with scouring the half-mile-long passage between the flight deck and the prison area for nonexistent space rats and space mice. Smokey did that a lot - Blummer had originally brought him aboard one of his other ships because he was convinced it was plagued by space rats. The other crew had ridiculed him and he'd been forbidden from having Smokey aboard any other craft. Needless to say, Blummer's paranoia had taken over and Smokey had been sneaked aboard every ship he'd ever set foot on. Details of how old Smokey actually was varied - some said he was as old as Blummer but Ryne knew even cats didn't live that long. Yet there he was, lively, content, always in the best condition and one empty eye socket covered with a velvet eye patch.

Ryne thought it wholly possible that there were space rats and space mice, because the crap Blummer fed Smokey out of the plastipaks he smuggled aboard would never satisfy even the most starving of alley cats. No, Smokey was too

happy to be satisfied with microwaved Kanga Chunks, so the ship undoubtedly had colonies of something else edible.

Hmmm. Regulations forbade the flight crew to intermingle with the prisoners, governor or guards. Maybe Smokey had killed all of them, and eaten their bodies.

Ryne gave Smokey a harder look than usual, searching for traces of half-eaten prisoner around his chops, but Smokey just sauntered over to the hatchway where his master was working, hacked up a furball, ignored the surprised shout from below, and settled on a red cushion in the corner.

'Nice one, Smokey,' Ryne smiled.

'Meeow,' was Smokey's reply.

'Yeah, whatever you say.' Ryne's attention was back on the computer - that contentious subject.

'Good morning BABE,' he said into the air.

In front of him, the air shimmered slightly and a three-dimensional holographic face about the size of a side plate flickered into existence.

'Good morning, Navigator Ryne. How may I help you?' The face opened its lusciously painted red lips alluringly and winked an eye.

Ryne smiled. Blummer hadn't had a chance to reprogram BABE's interactive personality print, which meant Marilyn Monroe was safe for another day. Ryne wasn't actually sure who Marilyn Monroe was - some famous political figure from the twentieth century, he thought, the wife of an Earth president or someone who'd been assassinated in the back of a speedercar or something, along with her hubby. History was not Ryne's strongest subject, but he'd seen pictures of her in holobooks and thought she was the most beautiful creature that had ever lived. Blummer, of course, did not agree and frequently changed the image to that of a rather stern, indeed sour-looking, older woman, with a hectoring voice and a holographic hand that always wagged a finger disapprovingly at them both. Ryne eventually guessed that this was Blummer's Auntie Jessie of whom he spoke incessantly, as if she were second only to the Goddess in the giving of all knowledge about everything in the universe.

Ryne decided that if that *was* Blummer's aunt, then it explained a great deal about him.

But today, BABE was Marilyn Monroe, glistening lips and sultry eyes and everything.

Phwoaarr.

'BABE, that bank of flashing lights have stopped, well, flashing. Why?'

Although totally unnecessary, it had been decided by BABE's creator to include a degree of human-like interaction. As a result, the holographic head floated over to the defunct bank and appeared to stare down at it. Then it looked back at Ryne.

'Circuits eight to eleven have blown.'

'What do the lights mean?'

'Mean?'

'Yeah, like what's their...' What was the word? Oh yeah. 'What's their *function*! What are they for?'

The Marilyn Monroe lips blew Ryne a kiss. 'Nothing, Navigator Ryne. They are decorative.'

Ryne pursed his lips. 'Decorative? Why?'

BABE smiled. 'Ever since mankind first discovered space flight, he has surrounded himself by rows of lights, blinking in random sequences that look impressive. They are a design of this kind of ship, placed there to make the crew feel comfortable. They have no functionality at all. They never have had in six hundred years of space travel.'

Ryne just stared at the non-flashing lights. All these years he had wondered, and now he knew.

'Blummer!' he yelled. 'Blummer, the lights, they don't mean nothing!'

'Aye, lad, I could've told you that,' Blummer called back. 'In all my years of service, never knew what good they did, so I figured that out donkey's years back.'

Ryne stared at the open hatchway and felt like dropping something very heavy and very blunt down it.

'Meeow,' added Smokey, rather unhelpfully.

'Yeah, thanks, Smokey.' Ryne punched some buttons, probably a little harder than they needed to be punched. 'BABE, tell the governor that we're approaching the planet.'

'Right away, Navigator Ryne.' BABE vanished.

It was a sun-drenched planet, where the small areas of vegetation were cocooned under vast plastic domes, and what little animal life existed tried to eke out some kind of living on the caked and cracked plains.

He sat in a wicker rocking chair, imported just for him, on the verandah of his large wooden house, also imported just for him.

A couple of the native wallahs were cleaning around him, while another was passing him a tray of cold drinks.

'No ice, man. Where's the blasted ice?'

Stupid wallah just stared at him, not understanding. 'Ice. Frozen water, cools the drinks, eh? In the refrigerator. Go on!'

The stupid wallah bowed and scarpered into the house. Missy would show him where the ice was kept, but it was a silly mistake. And that particular wallah had made a few too many recently. Any more and the poor blighter'd have to be shot. Safest thing. Couldn't go back to his native life now - the little devils would never accept him.

Savages - don't know why the Administration bothers with 'em.

Still, shouldn't complain - not a bad posting this one, lots of sun, lots of supplies and free servants. The Shabooj'm were a pretty stupid race, but the planet was rich in nistrium and fossil fuels, so it was important for the Administration to have a permanent presence.

Still, since the mining corporation johnnies all popped off having done their work, running this garrison for the Administration was a bit pointless but that didn't worry him. So long as the credits went into his account, Colonel Oliver Bartholomew Tolland OEE was happy.

Of course, that dratted war had seriously depleted the Empire's resources but little backwaters such as Sha 4 probably would remain forgotten outgoings on a ledger

somewhere, money constantly pumped in without anyone worrying.

Ah, there was Missy, carrying her iced drink herself, as a woman should.

‘Good gel,’ he said. ‘Well done. That young wallah isn’t going to last now, Missy. You tell him good that if he no work better, him no work here at all. Bwana Tolland – him angry with wallah.’

There, that told her, and she’d tell him. Had to keep these savages in their place, especially that woman.

There was a bleep in his pocket - and when he removed the offending communicator, it showed a tiny hologram of his young ranger foreman, Truman Crouch.

‘Yes, what is it, Crouch?’

‘It’s the Shabooj’m, Colonel! They’re everywhere!’

‘Well of course they are, man. That’s why we’re here. To keep ‘em safe and under our protection.’ What was the fool going on about?

‘No, Colonel. I mean, there are thousands of them, tens of thousands, all around us and... Oh my God, no!’

The hologram disappeared.

Crouch and his rangers were being attacked - the bloody savages were rising up against their masters. After all we’ve done for ‘em, as well.

It was the heat - it was intolerable of course. But the Shabooj’m were using it, relying on it to weaken the humans who were there to keep them safe. Well, Colonel Tolland would show ‘em.

He stood up, although the sudden bloodrush made him a bit giddy. The two Shabooj’m moved away in alarm.

‘What’s going on, eh?’ He shouted into the air. ‘Missy?’

The female Shabooj’m rushed out on to the verandah.

‘Bwana?’

But there was something about her - something that Tolland could see had changed. Like all women, Missy was a master of deception and evil, just like -

He shot her dead - straight through the forehead between her four eyes. One by one they closed and her small, wizened, grey body dropped to the floor.

One of the other Shabooj'm was going for a weapon, concealed behind the house. Tolland shot him twice in the back and then shot the third in the side of the head, before he could produce his concealed knife.

The other wallah, the one so useless with the drinks, rushed out of the house, so Tolland picked him off in mid-charge. Two shots to the stomach almost split him open and he was dead before he bounced on to the other end of the verandah.

No bloody savages were going to overthrow their rightful masters today!

Of course, it had all been Truman Crouch's doing - a set-up from the start.

Oh, yes, he'd told the court martial that he hadn't sent any holomessages at all - very clever that, managing to scramble all the communications systems that morning so no records were made. He'd thought it all through very nicely, thank you so much. No, apparently he and the rangers had been on the south plantation, worrying about some kind of Sha insect that was destroying a crop yield. And Tolland's 'murder spree' had been a result of hallucinations and mirages brought on by Sha's twin suns dehydrating him. Nonsense!

No, Crouch was clearly one of that ecology lot, a spy in the Empire's midst, and they'd hoodwinked them all. But not Colonel Oliver Tolland (now stripped of his OEE for some stupid reason). No, he could see what those desk jockeys never could. That the Administration was being betrayed, eroded from within. Now that the war was over, the old ways were falling away, giving in to this new, liberal Administration. And the old colonies, planets that men like him had lived and breathed to occupy and raise pennants on, they were being squandered. Sha was just the latest - and they had the audacity to blame it on him. They had called his self-defence against that blasted Missy woman and her

hordes 'slaughter of innocent indigenes', and had promptly given in to the Shabooj'm.

Just watch, eh? Just watch in five years when those savages have wrecked their planet and come crawling back on their hands and knees begging for forgiveness.

The court martial declared that the Shabooj'm at the house had no weapons hidden there, that there were no knives or guns on them, but Tolland knew what he saw. Fire in their eyes - the calling cards of killers.

It was all Crouch's fault - Oliver Tolland (they'd then stripped his military rank, for no reason) would get his revenge.

But somewhere behind it all was that bloody woman Maureen. All his life, he'd been plagued by her, as she worked from whatever place she was living in now, to get her revenge on him. Whatever he had done in his life, he knew that when something went wrong it was because of her. She would never give up, never let him forget her. She had friends in high places, he knew that. People who would help her get revenge for what she said Oliver Tolland had done to her.

'One day, Maureen Tolland, I will find out where you are hiding, and you'll know revenge then. One fine day

'Did you speak, Governor Tolland?'

'Wha-'

Governor Oliver Tolland was awake in an instant. Not on Sha, not at some military tribunal. Not even in the courtroom where those allegations about what he did to his wife came to light.

No, he was in his bloody office on this bloody spaceship.

Packed with bloody women.

'What d'you want, computer?'

'I was responding to what I believed was a sound from you, Governor Tolland.' BABE's holographic visage hovered before him.

'Who the bloody hell... have those blasted flight-crew johnnies been tampering with your internal imaging systems again, computer?'

'I believe so, Governor Tolland. I understand I am Marilyn Monroe. According to my databanks, she was a celebrity from a primitive moving-image video, circa the late 1950s.'

'Can't you change it?'

'No, Governor Tolland. My imaging can only be accessed by human operatives.'

Tolland sighed, and settled back into his chair. 'And what's the betting, eh, computer, that I can't do it from here?'

'Indeed not, Governor Tolland.'

'Typical. I'm supposed to be the bloody governor of this ruddy great ship and I can't even reprogram the wretched mainframe. Good, eh?'

'If you say so, Governor Tolland.'

'Yes. Yes, I do say so...' Tolland couldn't remember what he was saying so, but that did not matter now. 'What d'you want, computer, eh?'

'The flight-deck report that we are approaching the assigned planet.'

'Oh, jolly good show. Well, I suppose we need to warn the prisoners, get them ready to do their business and all that. Thank you, computer.'

'Governor.' BABE vanished.

Tolland steepled his fingers and rocked back slightly in his comfortable armchair. He looked around his not small office - the nice paper-lined walls, painted a soft green. Paintings and sculptures - memories of his many colonial postings - plus a framed photograph of himself standing aside a dead mudwampa he'd bagged while he and Maureen had been on safari on Llandros.

In the corner, farthest from the door, was a massive fish tank, taking up nearly the whole wall, with just two brightly coloured fish in it, swimming around, with enough food to keep them happy.

The opposite wall was lined with archaic metallic filing cabinets, full of sheets of paper because Tolland preferred to work that way. Keeping everything on computer chip and using datapads was all very well, but nothing made him feel



more secure, more in control of his environment, than keeping the paperwork up to date.

It also gave him something to do, trapped out here in the vastness of space - not that he could see it. The ship was deliberately designed without any kind of viewing ports except for the flight deck - and he would never go up there. The enlisted crew (all two of them) and the pilot lived up there. Regulations forbade them to take the lengthy walk into the prison sector, and he had no desire himself to converse with the galaxy's uneducated movers and loaders.

He got up and opened one of the filing-cabinet drawers - empty except for a bottle of finest bourbon. Saving that for a special occasion - the date of his retirement from this hideous job the service had found him.

The ship was massive and, on learning its specifications, Oliver Tolland had been impressed. Clearly those fools at the court martial still realized that men like him were not two a penny and deserved something of quality to do. If he was forbidden to return to a planet-side colony, then a ship big enough to hold a colony would do.

It was not until his papers, or rather microstrip for his datapad, came through that he realized that he was not a colonial governor as he thought, but a prison governor. Sent out to administer a deep-space scavenger crew - the scum of the galaxy who avoided the death sentences or life imprisonment passed down to them by working for the Administration.

The scavenger crew were used to going to planets and removing whatever was there deemed necessary by the governor. This could involve wearing suits on radiation-blasted former war zones to retrieve lost weaponry or corpses, going into alien environments to get samples for the terraformers, or just getting as much scrap metal and other things as possible to return to the Service for smelting down. It was an unpleasant job and frequently the prisoners died through negligence, faulty equipment or their own stupidity. Escape attempts were rare - the planets visited were not the sort that other ships were likely to come to and enable

rescue. But for a majority of the prisoners, it was a better life than a punishment dome on one of the outer moon colonies or asteroid-belt harbours, waiting for their termination orders.

Governor Tolland's dismay at his new job was further enhanced when he learnt that the entire group of prisoners were women. Bawdy, butch thugs who fought and bitched and screamed and raved like Maureen had for so many years. It was like being locked up with eight clones of his ex-wife, all sneering at him.

As a result, he tended to leave the running of the women to the pair of Grutchas that the Administration employed as guards. An irony, that. The Grutchas were a canine species - and Cassius and his partner Brutus reminded Tolland of nothing more than man-shaped Alsatian dogs. Nasty, brutish, but loyal and intelligent. The women rarely argued with them. All dogs together, eh?

Right now, he was a man - or Grutchas - down, as Brutus had recently fallen ill. The ship's MO, another prisoner called Njobe, had diagnosed her as being run-down and stressed out, but Tolland knew the Grutchas of old. Fabulously resilient creatures, always ready to fight and die for their masters during the recent wars. For a Grutchas, especially a female, to be 'stressed' was a little odd. But, despite her criminal status, Tolland had a grudging respect for Njobe - whatever her crime was (it was the only one not on file, apparently a favour in return for her being the ship's medical officer), she did her job exceptionally well.

Tolland replaced the bourbon untouched to its drawer and reached back to his ornately carved (but fake wood) desk and pressed the buzzer on the communications device.

Instantly a holo of Cassius's furry face appeared.

'Governor?'

'Good morning, Cassius. Could you send... Lloyd in please.'

He had nearly referred to Lloyd as 'Top Dog', the traditional name for the democratically (or probably undemocratically) elected leader of women prisoners. Somehow phrases like 'Top Dog' seemed inappropriate when Grutchas were

about - Grutchas had honour and class and should not be insulted.

'Immediately, Governor,' Cassius's holo disappeared and Tolland opened his desk drawer.

He moved the service blaster aside (a relic of his past which he had insisted on taking aboard; the Administration couldn't be bothered to argue and had let him) and removed a large tube of fish food.

He crossed to the fish tank and began to tip the contents on to the top of the water, watching as Guppy and Matilda swam happily to the surface, their eyes gazing at him with love and adoration.

Oliver Tolland considered Guppy and Matilda to be his only real 'family' these days - they'd been with him on both *Analyas V* and then later on *Sha*.

People forever told him that fish could not return his affection, that they just weren't built that way, but eighteen years with his tropical fish had taught Oliver Tolland differently. He knew they respected him, because what else could they do? *He* had nurtured them, no one else. Of course they recognized his affection and returned it.

Experts! Who needed them?

'There you are, Guppy. Hello, Tilda. You eat all of that up now. Mmm. Lovely, yes? Not long now my loves and you'll soon be on *Kastor Major* and we can put you into a big aquarium with lots of new colourful friends. There, there. It's not nice, is it? Keeping you caged up like this. You don't deserve it. Not like some people I could mention.'

Perhaps appropriately the buzzer to his office buzzed, but he carried on feeding and inspecting his fish. It was just as much part of his daily ritual as Lloyd's morning reports. And anyway, she knew he'd be with his fish.

She liked them too.

'Talking of which...' Tolland said to the fish. 'Come in, Lloyd.'

There was no sound of the door opening, so, sighing to himself, Tolland turned away from his fish to let Lloyd in, only to find her already standing there.

'I said to come in - oh, I see you already have. It might have been better protocol to wait until asked, Lloyd.'

Lloyd stood there in her green coveralls, arms folded, her russet-coloured hair shaved close apart from one very long bootlace-width plait which ran from the base of her hair down to the small of her back. In Tolland's day, regulations would have been adhered to and the plait hacked off, but these days prisoners could get away with murder - no pun intended - and regulations went by the board. It had been Cassius and Brutus who had suggested to Tolland after his first meeting with Lloyd that he let the women get away with their eccentricities of hair and make-up. It was one thing fewer for them to get aggressive over.

Tolland was not particularly in favour but agreed to let it go for a trial period. But if these blasted women let him down, well, there'd be hell to pay and no mistake.

'You wanted to see me, Tolland?'

'That's *Governor* Tolland to you, Lloyd. You may have elected yourself Top Dog but to me you're just the same irrelevant baggage. And it is customary to wait before entering my office. Learn any manners at the Remand Centre?'

'You wanted to see me, Governor Tolland?'

Was there any disrespect in Lloyd's voice? It was so hard to tell: she was so good at masking herself. Lloyd could make an outrageous demand sound like a harmless request if she so wanted - Tolland had almost been caught out by her, but not yet. Oh, no, Oliver Tolland was not as stupid as Lloyd and the others might want to think. In his day, women were upfront, not duplicitous. And Lloyd had a very strong voice, hard and rough, as if she gargled with sandpaper or something. Attractive in a bestial sort of way. To some people, anyway.

'Yes. I think we've actually got something to do. Some orders came in yesterday, and we're approaching our designated target now.'

'And about bloody time, too.' Lloyd paused a minute and then continued. 'Well? What and where?'

Tolland coughed, pointedly. She had to learn a bit of patience, you know. Remember that he was her governor and would take as little or as much time as he wanted to explain things.

‘It’s a relatively unexplored planet named Ardethe. There’s been a bunch of military and archaeological types who have gone missing. Administration believes they’re all dead - we have to go down, salvage anything we can from their encampment and try to find out what happened. Of course, they’ve not checked to see if it’s safe for us. Oh, no. In my day that would’ve been the first thing, but now it’s just orders to send us down and find what we can.’

Lloyd smiled, but Tolland could see the irony in her eyes.

‘We are expendable, Governor. Besides, you’ll be quite safe up here on the *KayBee 2*. It’s just me and the other prisoners who’ll be exposed to whatever is down there.’

‘Yes, young lady, well that’s just where you may be wrong. The AMS *Trigan* has vanished as well, in orbit, just as we will be, so I’m in as much danger as you lot. So get in, get out and be quick. I want a preliminary report as soon as possible. Understood?’

‘I suppose so, Governor. Why are the Administration so interested in a dig anyway?’

‘Ours is not to reason why, Lloyd. Well, anyway, yours isn’t. Get your lot together and prepare for landfall in about two hours.’

‘My “lot” will be ready, Governor Tolland. They always are.’

Yes, well, there was something else he wanted to say to this young Missy. Knock some of that smug arrogance out of her, eh? In his day, women knew their place. Speak when spoken to and all that.

‘One last thing, Lloyd: I’m not enamoured by your tone or general attitude. If you’re not careful, I’ll intervene and put someone else in charge. Someone like Townsend might make a good new Top Dog.’

Lloyd laughed loudly - not the reaction she ought to have given. Her accent became marginally stronger when she answered him.

‘Townsend? In charge? Ha! That I’ll have to see!’

‘Don’t go too far, Lloyd. People have always said that Oliver Tolland is a fair and generous governor. Please don’t let me tarnish my own reputation.’

Tolland turned back to his Guppy and Matilda, dropping them a few more titbits from the food tube.

Lloyd had wandered away - he could hear that she was back by the door.

‘Of course not, Governor. Your reputation as a fair and just man is legendary in the dorm.’ The door slid open. ‘Give the fish a bite for me.’ And she was gone.

‘You know, Guppy, in my day women like that would’ve been shot for that. Yes, they would. Backchat indeed! Why did I have to end up here? Not like in the old days when we knew what was what, eh?’

Ryne was struggling to reattach some pieces of very frayed-looking copper wiring to the back-plates of the flashing lights.

He knew it was a pointless exercise but, while the pilot took them into orbit around this big blue planet, he had nothing better to do.

And Blummer was cooking something in the tiny galley, and Ryne needed something to take his mind off that. Even Smokey had opted for a leave of absence somewhere in the bowels of the *KayBee 2* that only cats could find.

‘What d’you think we’re doing here anyway?’ he yelled out.

Blummer grunted from the galley. ‘Bound to be dangerous, lad. Always is on these scavenger ships.’

‘Oh, cheers, Blummer, mate. You’re really cheering me up. Remind me to invite you to my funeral - make it a real party, won’t you?’

Blummer’s fat face appeared at the entrance to the flight deck. ‘Ryne, lad, when you’ve done this job for as long as I have, you learn not to worry about things. Just get the ship to wherever it’s meant to be, take your pay packet and enjoy life during your leave periods. Then next time you get assigned it’ll be a cruise liner with a decent canteen, a decent

bed and decent stewardesses wanting to brighten your life up.'

Ryne managed to get two lights to blink pointlessly. 'Knowing my luck it'll be a dumper tug with some smelly old git of a skipper who'll just laugh at us and make us do his work while he shags the barmaid at the Stardust Dancer.'

Blummer shook his head. 'Your problem, Ryne, is that you're always looking on the black side. Cheer up. And lunch is nearly ready. What d'you want?'

'Aww, go on, surprise me.'

'You've got it, Ryne, lad. I'll do you a feast to remember.' He disappeared back into the galley.

Ryne shoved a screwdriver a bit too hard into a back-plate and fractured the perspex on the light. 'Yeah, I bet I'll remember it. I'll probably see it again once or twice tonight. Any second now, it'll be "Yeast and Water Mix" or "Soaked Yeast" or -'

'Hey, lad, how does Instant Yeast grab you?'

'Yeah, great, Blummer. Just great,' Ryne shouted back. He shook his head. Goddess, which was better? Trapped in this floating tomb or slowly being poisoned by Blummer's culinary delights with yeast and water? Two lights phutted out again, despite the repairs he had performed on them scant moments earlier. 'Oh, for crying out loud!'

Ryne prepared to start all over again when an alarm buzzer sounded. He rolled out from under the console and ran towards the pilot's module, climbing the six-runged ladder into the cramped space. Readings were zipping across monitor screens and the internal lights dipped to a dull red, indicating an emergency.

Of course, only the pilot would normally have been aware of this but Ryne had intended to reroute that particular emergency measure so that the whole flight deck would get the same warning, but he had never got round to it.

'Blummer!' he yelled.

Within seconds, Blummer was at the bottom of the ladder, looking up. He was sensible enough to know there was barely enough room for the pilot and Ryne, let alone a third person.

'This pilot is so stupid,' Ryne screamed. 'It's all very well for the Prison Service to stick him in here, but he lacks any instinct. We've got a skimmer coming out of hyperlight in front of us, and he didn't do anything except sound the alarm!'

'What're you doing then, lad?'

'Trying to divert us slightly. If this bloody skimmer comes out in the next sixty seconds, half his hull will bond to this flight deck and you and I will know what it's like to live inside a solid metal bulkhead. For half a second before we go splat!'

'Fair enough, lad. You keep working. Ignore me. You don't have to -'

'Blummer, shut up!'

'Yes, lad.'

'Stupid bloody pilot. Stupid, stupid, stupid!' Ryne tapped furious commands into the navigational console, trying to shift their vectors slightly. Get away from the opening that was forming to let the skimmer through. 'What kind of idiot drops out of hyperlight at this speed anyway without booking a flight plan?'

'Raiders?'

'Well, unless they want a bunch of butch women and Tolland's fish, I can't see why they hit us and not a cruiser. Besides, I thought this area was under Administration jurisdiction. No one else allowed here.'

'Try telling raiders that, lad.'

'Good point.' Ryne made a last couple of jabs at the console. 'Done it. Slowed down enough. BABE! What's going on?'

The image of Marilyn Monroe popped into existence.

'Hey, where's Maiden Aunt Jessie gone,' growled Blummer.

Ryne ignored him. 'BABE, the skimmer should materialize directly above us. Can we deflect it away?'

'Yes Navigator Ryne. I can divert auxiliary power to the shields above.'

'Do it, then get a trace on that skimmer.'

'Why, lad?'



‘Because, Blummer, I’ve just overridden that stupid pilot’s programming and will have to answer for it back home. I’d like some kind of proof to back my reasoning up.’

There was a pause, then: ‘I cannot lock on to that skimmer, Navigator Ryne. It has dropped out of hyperlight but already moved off.’

Ryne cursed. ‘You had plenty of... oh, sod it. Where has it gone?’

‘Towards the planet below. I shall alert Governor Tolland.’

‘Yes... if I can’t have it tracked, at least have it logged. Thank you for your help, BABE.’ Bloody computers.

Governor Tolland was flicking through some papers when BABE’s holographic face suddenly arrived in his office.

‘Oh, computer, in my day you’d have given a little bleep to let me know you wanted my attention.’

‘My apologies, Governor Tolland. Would you like me to create a subroutine to ensure that in future?’

‘Yes please, that would be most appreciated.’ Tolland put his papers away. ‘Now, what can I do for you, eh?’

‘Navigator Ryne asked me to inform you that everything was proceeding smoothly, Governor Tolland, and that this ship should be in orbit within thirty minutes.’

Tolland frowned. ‘Oh.’ That seemed a fairly pointless errand to tie computer time and energy up on. He tried to remember Ryne: tall, thin chap, too young and spotty to be the navigator. That’s what he recalled. Mind you, he had a spark more brain in him than that tubby co-pilot, Bluster or whatever he was called. He’d seen them on the day they took off from Service Central, but not since. Quite right, too - they had their jobs and he had his. So long as the dratted ship got them to Ardethe, that was all that mattered.

‘Well, thank him very much, computer.’

‘Of course, Governor Tolland.’ The face vanished as quietly as it had come, leaving Tolland with his paperwork.

‘Odd computer, that one,’ he muttered. ‘Might need an overhaul or upgrade when we get home.’ He looked across the room to his fish tank, and smiled happily. Dear Guppy,

dear Matilda. Not a worry in the world. No women prisoners, no guards, no nervous navigators, no objectionable computers. Just lots of water and food, all they needed.

Lucky blighters.

The lighting on the flight deck had reverted to normal, and Blummer was placing plates of steaming grey mush on to the tiny foldaway table he'd set up.

A red checkerboard tablecloth with matching napkins had been spread on it, a large dish of nothing covering an ugly red stain from some previous inedible disaster he had conjured up for Ryne's delight.

Smokey made a brief appearance, sniffed at the grey sludge and with his one good eye gave Ryne a sympathetic look, mewed briefly and slunk away somewhere.

Lucky bloody cat, thought Ryne. 'This looks good, Blummer,' he lied cheerfully.

'Aye, lad, yeast is a major source of protein, energy and nutrient. Can't go wrong with yeast.'

Probably had shares in the yeast companies, Ryne decided. No other reason why anyone would spend so much time extolling the virtues of something so bloody inedible.

BABE materialized directly in front of Blummer. 'Hello Co-Pilot Blummer,' it purred, giving him a wink.

'I demand, Ryne, that you give it back Maiden Aunt Jessie's face!'

Ryne just smiled at the Marilyn face, which blew him a very slow kiss. 'I have given the governor your message, Navigator Ryne. He says it is logged and he commended your quick action.' BABE vanished.

Ryne smiled at Blummer. 'Good to know someone appreciates me.'

'Yeah, right. When we've eaten dinner, how about a quick game before we enter orbit and I have to start doing the real work around here?'

'Such as?'

'Tiddlywinks?'

Ryne shook his head, trying not to gag on his first mouthful of grey yeast something-or-other. 'Using what?'

'My portable set, of course.' Blummer was shovelling his food away as if he hadn't eaten in weeks.

Ryne wanted to gag a bit more. 'Blummer, the last time we played tiddlywinks with your portable set, half the tiddlywinks were missing. You, in your infinite wisdom, had tried to pass 'em off on Drebin as "ancient Earth gold sovereigns", which wouldn't have been quite so bad if they hadn't been red and green plastic.'

'Got off the planet though, didn't we lad? Bought us time to escape that dreadful reptile and his hired hands.'

Ryne shuddered at the thought. 'Anyway, I hated tiddlywinks. You always used to win.'

'That's because it's a game of skill and strategy, Ryne. You just have to have the knack.'

'Or the ability to invent new rules each time your tiddly goes and winks off the table.'

Blummer coughed. 'Yes, well. All right.'

As Blummer started clearing away, Smokey popped his head around the entrance, checking it was safe to come in without being force-fed Ryne's unwanted yeast. Satisfied that his stomach was safe for another few hours, he crossed the deck, jumped up the steps and into the pilot's module, where he curled up on the cyborg's lap and went to sleep.

Space, so much space. Even now, after two months travelling in this rusting hulk of a ship, she still couldn't quite get used to all the space.

The *KayBee 2*, as the ship was now called, had once been the *Gossamer Wing*, a huge pleasure cruiser taking hundreds of rich passengers from one end of the galaxy to the other at hyperlight speeds, powered by massive tri-star neutronic engines.

Now, eighty per cent of the luxurious rooms and saunas and restaurants and reception areas had been gutted, painted dark grey and converted into huge holds in which the various scavenged materials that were now the purpose of

this ship's flights could be stored. A handful of rooms had been customized to hold prisoners (twenty in total, out of the original five hundred), although only eight were used at the moment. The captain's quarters served as Governor Tolland's office and sleeping area, while the two Grutchu guards had a suite to themselves. Only the ship's original medical centre was still in use, although unsurprisingly bereft of anything other than a basic pharmacy and a couple of diagnostic beds.

Siobhan Lloyd rubbed an itch on her nose - her nose always itched when there was trouble brewing - and the women she was Top Dog of personified 'trouble'. She hadn't asked to be in charge, the others had just sort of accepted this when she was the first to speak up and work out who would sleep where when they had been herded aboard.

The *KayBee 2* had arrived on the unnamed little asteroid orbiting Rimulus after leaving Service Central a few days before. The prisoners selected then collected the few possessions they had in storage at Kamp Konkordia, and departed. Kamp Konkordia was the correction centre built on the asteroid, from which there was no escape - to go to Kamp Konkordia was a life sentence and you either died there or got transferred to scavenger detail as Lloyd and the others had done.

Lloyd had gone to Kamp Konkordia direct from the courtroom on Kastor Major, where she had been sentenced. Her life partner had been in court as well, but been taken to a different remand centre - Lloyd had no idea where. All she knew was that they had been separated after eight years and she was determined to locate that centre and be reunited. Somehow.

Kastor Major's oppressive totalitarianism had no regard for individual rights and was considered somewhat archaic and partisan by the System Administration, but because it was an ally rather than a colony world, the Administration were unable to interfere with its legal system. Whereas all the other women on board fell directly under the Administration's control, Lloyd's unique status might have been another thing that singled her out in their eyes. Certainly back at Kamp

Konkordia, her origins and her crime had made her a target of many other prisoners (all women - mixed centres were a definite no-no), led always by one Marianne Townsend. On hearing she was being transferred to the scavenger detail, Lloyd had breathed a sigh of relief – she was able to cope with the other prisoners quite well but after eighteen months even Lloyd was becoming tired of Townsend. To discover that they were to be cooped up on the *KayBee 2* together was an irony she was sure wasn't lost on Kamp Konkordia's governor.

In Kamp Konkordia, the women had been restricted in so many ways: their time (twelve hours a day working), their personal space (six to a dorm), their personal habits (Lloyd enjoyed reading, almost impossible with the noise and activity back at the centre) and their communication with each other (talking was forbidden in the thin corridors, and after ten at night).

Here, Lloyd took a great deal of pleasure in just walking around in the holds or along the corridors to the medical centre or Tolland's office and wallowing in the fact that she could go for fifteen minutes without seeing anyone else.

One day, she might try to get towards the flight deck. Apparently there was a triple dwarf-star-alloy hatchway separating the two sections of the ship, but there had to be a bypass somewhere, because in the days when this had been the *Gossamer Wing*, emergency regulations would have insisted on it.

But for now, she had thirty minutes to pick a team to get down to this planet, find what Tolland had been ordered to get them to find, and get out again. Sure, it was a dangerous occupation, but, if nothing else, it gave their existence more meaning than Kamp Konkordia's microchip replacement service or uniform repair service ever could.

But who to take? Townsend, without a doubt. She was aggressive, spiteful and deeply unpleasant - if Lloyd could find a way to space her she would - but at least planet-side, she could keep an eye on her. Charley Connor would be good - she was a scrapper and argumentative but with more

brains than any of the others. She had a curiosity that could help them find stuff they might otherwise overlook. Two others - Jeni Grierson because... well, she just wanted Jeni around. Poor kid wasn't old enough to really understand any of this, barely a teenager, lost her family to the big space plague left behind after the wars. Finally? Yeah, Jay Hallett, the cocky one. Too much a right-hand woman for Townsend to be left up here.

Lloyd pushed open the doorway to the mess hall where the others were polishing off breakfast, except Ghoti. With a nod of greeting to Cassius, who nodded back, Lloyd scooped up some slop and threw it on to a plate. She then sat next to Jeni Grierson and Lisa DeJoine, which unfortunately placed her opposite Townsend and Hallett, who were, as usual, grinning like Cheshire cats at some shared joke that was probably unfunny, unremarkable and unpleasant.

Townsend stopped just as she was putting the last of her breakfast in her mouth. 'Ooh, watch out, everybody. Here comes teacher's pet.'

Lloyd sighed. Same old routine. Every crukking morning. 'Yeah, right, that's so funny, Townsend. The hysteria's killing me.'

Connor finished off her food with a belch. 'So what's the news? Anything happening?'

'Could be.' Lloyd tried to ignore the tastelessness of her food. Yeast and water. Why couldn't someone find some new and original ways of making this stuff edible?

Townsend glared at her. 'Well, don't keep us in suspense, woman. Spit it out.'

Hallett made a hawking sound in her throat, and Jeni Grierson flinched slightly. This only made Hallett worse and she started to bend back her fork, ready to send a dollop of food flying in Jeni's direction, causing Townsend to smile eagerly.

Lloyd coughed quietly, and caught Hallett's eye. For a brief second, Hallett was caught between a rock and a hard place - Townsend's encouragement and Lloyd's obvious warning. Hallett replaced her food on her own plate and carried on

eating. Townsend sighed and shot another venomous look at Lloyd, who ignored her.

‘Basically, the Prison Service thinks -’

‘Ah, you’ve been tricked. The Prison Service can’t think.’ DeJoine waited for everyone to laugh, but no one did, so she opted out of making further comments.

‘The Prison Service,’ Lloyd continued, ‘says there’s been an accident down below. Some AMS crew and a bunch of grave robbers have vanished. So guess what, kiddies - we’re off to find buried treasure.’

The groans from everyone else underlined their displeasure.

‘Maybe that was all the Prison Service could think of for us to do.’ Jeni didn’t speak very often, but when she did Lloyd knew it took a bit of guts. Nine times out of ten Townsend or Hallett would throw some stupid comment back. Today was no exception.

‘Maybe it’s all they could think of,’ Townsend mimicked. ‘Cruk, you’re pathetic, Grierson.’

‘Drop it, Townsend.’

Townsend looked at Lloyd, undisguised loathing on her face. ‘Oh, dear, have I offended the poor pretty teenager? Is the big hulking dyke gonna jump to her protection? Ah, how brave, how nice. How sick.’

Connor interrupted them both. ‘So, when do we go?’

‘Soon enough, Charley. Time for you to get yourself together and bring some kit. We might have to do some digging.’ Lloyd pointed at Hallett. ‘Jay, you’re piloting the shuttle, Jeni, you’re coming too.’ Lloyd then put a hand on DeJoine’s shoulder, ignoring the slight flinch before moving it off again. DeJoine wasn’t phobic about Lloyd - the woman knew that. But she was phobic about touch - and Lloyd could only guess at what trauma the French girl had gone through at some point to make her that edgy. ‘Lisa, I want you and Ghoti to stay put, OK?’

DeJoine nodded. ‘OK. Have you told Ghoti that you’re going?’

‘Hardly,’ butted in Townsend. ‘Little Miss Religion is busy praying to “Hindiwindionionbhaji”.’

Lloyd ignored her. ‘I’ll talk to her after her meditation.’

‘And me?’

‘You, Townsend? You’re coming with us - right at the front, where I can keep an eye on you. And, if there’s any justice in this universe, there’ll be something big, slimy and nasty down there that’ll pick you off first.’ Lloyd smiled humourlessly. ‘Is that OK?’

‘What supplies are we taking? How long do you think, O Great Leader, we’ll be down there?’

‘Long enough for you to dry out, Townsend.’

‘Dry out? Chance’d be a fine thing to get pissed. Little Jeni here’s probably had all the booze, thinking it’s soda pop.’

Jeni looked up, alarmed. ‘No I haven’t, Marianne! Honest. I wouldn’t steal

Lloyd leant across the table, her face level with Townsend’s. ‘Grierson doesn’t drink, Townsend. Leave her alone.’

‘Oh, sorry. We forgot you’re little Miss Innocent’s guardian angel. Hey, Jay, let’s go party with the baby -’

Lloyd’s hand was suddenly on Townsend’s wrist, holding it down on the table, very hard. ‘Friendly warning Townsend: lay one filthy digit on that girl, influence her in any way, and I’ll string you up.’

Townsend wrenched her hand free. ‘Yeah? And you try it, sweetheart, and you’ll be sitting on your face for the rest of the trip.’

Connor slammed her fist on to the table. ‘Hey, ease up you two. It’s going to be a long day.’

Townsend kept her eyes firmly locked on Lloyd. ‘Yeah, and it’s getting longer.’

Human women. He would never really understand them. Why did they spend so much of their lives hating and fighting instead of just trying that bit harder to get along with each other?

Cassius had not wanted this posting. He and his mate Brutus had been told it was an honour to serve under the



famous Colonel Oliver Tolland OEE, but even on Cerberus they had heard that Tolland had been stripped of all ranks and privileges after starting a massacre on his last colony. There was no honour in serving such a human as that.

Now Brutus was ill and unconscious in the medical area. The human medical officer was very pleasant but she didn't know that much about Grutchas and he was worried that Brutus might be sicker than the doctor realized.

It had come on very suddenly - Brutus had been playing some game with the on-board computer when she had complained of a headache. Within half an hour, she was comatose and Cassius was rushing her to the doctor.

Since then, Brutus had not regained consciousness and while everything inside Cassius made him want to sit beside her and care for her, he knew that their honour would be debased if he abandoned his post as guard to these human criminals.

Watching them fight and snarl reminded him of the pups back home, except that they were too immature to know better. These humans were supposed to be intelligent, but really they were just savages.

He quite liked a couple of them - Lloyd, the leader, was pleasant, and the technical one, Connor, she was fun at times. But the others left him cold. Only the small, dark-skinned one with the red spot on her forehead seemed interesting. Her life was governed by her faith, but it also satisfied her. Belief in the gods, even if they weren't the gods that Grutchas believed in, was always to be respected and honoured.

And Grutchas always believed in their own personal honour, no matter what provocation was put in their way.

Lloyd was walking past him. 'Hi, Cassius. How's Brutus?'

'Her condition remains stable, thank you, Lloyd.'

'Good. Good. Be nice to see her up and about sometime soon.' Lloyd looked back at the women. 'Says a lot when I'm more concerned about the screws than the other prisoners, eh, Cassius?'

As she left, it crossed Cassius's mind that sometimes Lloyd was almost too good to be true.

'There we are, my darlings. Lots more food to come before the end of the day.' Tolland was still standing at the fish tank, emptying the last of one tube of food on to the water. He turned around to face the tall, rather poised woman standing by the door.

She had a quite regal bearing that Tolland found most interesting - if it wasn't for the white smock and trousers she was wearing, she might be a holoivid model. Her almost black skin reflected the light beautifully, underscoring her pronounced cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes and naturally puckered lips. Tolland's ancestors would have probably referred to her as a Nubian slave or some such in their day, but to him, she was an object of beauty and perfection. On a ship otherwise loaded with what he could only think of as dogs - both human and canine - she was a beacon in the dark.

'And how is your patient today, doctor?'

Doctor Njobe nodded slowly. 'All right, I believe, Governor. I cannot say that there has been any real improvement but she has not deteriorated in any way either. That is probably a good sign. Had I known I might be tending to Grutchas as well as the prisoners, I might have done some research into them, prepared myself for this. But, of course, the Prison Service did not consider it worthwhile to alert me to such things.'

Tolland nodded, trying to look understanding. That was, of course, the trouble with the bloody woman - just like Maureen. They were always so quick to apportion blame, and always to someone else.

Like Missy back on Sha - whenever one of those wallahs bugged up their tasks, it was always the fault of the sun, or the tools, or the timetable. Never her fault for not inspiring them, not making them work harder. Oh, no.

'And are the women up to the task in front of them? Fit I mean?'

‘Oh, absolutely, Governor. I have personally overseen their fitness regime. On the whole they are at peak performance. Only the young one, Grierson, worries me. I think she tries too hard to be like the others, especially Lloyd. She’s not as old as them, and not quite as strong. She’ll injure herself before long.’

Tolland nodded. But which one was Grierson? He’d have to look her up in his files later.

‘Still, your job, Njobe, is to get her sorted out. Don’t want the little devil dying on us. Bad for morale, you know.’

‘Not to mention the profits of the Prison Service.’

Tolland gave her a squinted look, searching for some sarcasm; but no, Njobe seemed to be quite deliberate in her words.

‘Indeed, Doctor. Profits must always be at the forefront of our minds, eh?’

Njobe smiled. ‘Yes, Governor.’

Tolland couldn’t think what to say next. ‘Well, interesting little job for the women, don’t you think? Exploring this famous legend or whatever it is.’

‘The legends of Ardethe are certainly of interest, Governor. I am sure that the planet below will offer a wide variety of challenges and secrets. Not to mention financial rewards when we have finished.’

‘What? Oh, yes, absolutely.’ He looked over at his fish, desperate for something to do. To look busy. Why did Njobe fluster him so? ‘I’ve ordered Lloyd to lead them down there of course. I’m sure she can look after the others. Townsend with her?’

‘Yes, I believe that she is, Governor.’

Tolland found a loose thread poking out of a sleeve button to stretch, twist and generally inspect. ‘Well, I’m sure that a good mystery will make their friendship blossom further.’

When there was no response, Tolland glanced up and saw Njobe frowning. He couldn’t remember when he’d last seen her frown. If, in fact, he’d *ever* seen her frown. Queer fish this one, no doubt about that.

‘Governor Tolland, may I speak freely?’

‘No, not really, but go on.’

Njobe nodded, understanding that Tolland was only giving her a small piece of leeway. ‘I believe that there is the likelihood of trouble - those two do not exactly work well together. In my opinion -’

‘You don’t have opinions, Doctor, remember that. I have opinions. I have excuses. I have reasons. You, on the other hand, have duties. State your case and leave it at that.’

‘One of them is going to kill the other before long, Governor. That is my professional judgment as a medical doctor, as someone who sees them every day and as someone with a passing interest in psychology.’

‘You know, Njobe, in my day, people like that were made to work together.’ Tolland moved to the fish tank, and bowed down, staring into the water, watching Guppy and Matilda swim about together, focusing on their beautiful movements, their slow but steady gestures as they swam around the enormous tank, weaving and ducking between coral, stones and small plants. ‘People were forced to depend upon each other the whole time until they got used to it. Until they realized there’s more to life than fighting every day. You get my drift? I don’t think there’ll be a showdown. Gunfight at the *KayBee 2* Corral? But if there is, there will be hell to pay! I don’t have trouble in my little empires. They’re all here for the same reason: for causing that sort of aggression, violence and suchlike. But that’s no excuse to carry on now. In my day, they’d have all been picked up and had their heads banged together.’ He tapped the glass, attracting one of the fish towards him. ‘D’you like fish, Njobe? Tropical fish like Guppy and Matilda? Here they are, away from their natural environments but happy. Swimming about in there together. Just the two of them. Just look at the way they stare around. But do they fight? Two totally different breeds. Possibly even natural enemies. But no fighting there. They don’t try to kill each other. Such grace, such charm. No nastiness at all. Well, Njobe?’

Njobe did not answer.

‘Njobe?’

Tolland stood up and turned around, but apart from him and the two fish, the governor's office was empty.

Many hundreds of miles below the orbiting *KayBee 2*, deep within the blue planet, was a building.

It was reached via a series of vast chambers linked by thin, delicate walkways. Below each walkway was another chamber, the bottom of which was too distant to be seen without the most advanced visual enhancers.

At the bottom of One of those uncomprehendingly deep chambers were the mashed and mutilated bodies of the archaeological team and their support AMS crew, which would decay to nothing long before anyone might ever find them.

In the building that the walkways led to was the casket that had been located and opened by Ensign Sax and Bernard Harper.

Of them, there was no sign - it was as if they had never been there. But remaining in the casket was the attractive young man they had discovered, still lying comatose.

Attached to his temples were some threads of wiring, linked into a strange helmet-like device at the very tip of the casket. It looked as if the man's head should have been inserted into the helmet, but whatever mechanism should do that had failed. The wires were frayed and damaged - that they had linked themselves to his head was a feat in itself.

And now something new was happening. As the ship above lowered in its orbit, preparing to send down a shuttle with a crew who were to search the planet, various circuits and mechanisms within the chamber came to life. Hundreds of tiny lights flashed in unison; a few monitor screens blinked, rolled their images and then settled with a vision of static.

And then a holographic face appeared in midair, looking down on the man identified by his tag as Chris Cwej.

As if brought back to life by the same energy as had reanimated the chamber, Chris's eyes flickered beneath closed eyelids, as if in heavy REM sleep. Then his eyes slowly

opened, and a tongue sneaked out of his mouth, trying to moisten his lips.

He swallowed, frowned and then remembered to breathe again.

‘Alive. Good.’

The holographic face lowered until it was just above Chris’s chest and he stared blankly at it. It was a beautiful woman’s face, red-painted lips, platinum-blond hair, slightly wavy. It winked at him.

‘Who are you?’ he stuttered hoarsely. ‘Where am I?’

But the hologram made no response. It just winked again, and puckered its lips, blowing him a kiss, followed by a huge grin.

Chris took in his surroundings and pushed himself up, barely noticing as the wires flopped from his temples. He saw the tag on his belt and read it.

‘And who the hell is Chris Cwej?’

As he stood up, albeit a little shakily, he put his hand to his head. ‘I... I don’t remember... How did I get here? Where am I? For that matter, who am I? Why can’t I remember anything?’

He put a hand into the pocket of his trousers and felt a tiny sphere. He brought it out - green, with a black button on top. Maybe this would help him remember. It certainly felt familiar.

He pressed the black button, but nothing happened. He waited and pressed it again, but still nothing happened.

Then a shaft of thin light shot out of one of the distant walls, striking Chris right between the shoulder blades. He staggered and then fell to the floor, unconscious again.

The small green sphere rolled away into a corner, lost in the shadows of a stone console.

‘Sorry about that, Mr Cwej. Please bear with us while we arrange for some new escorts to take you back to civilization. And another couple of hosts for our greater plan.’ And with a final seductive wink at his motionless body, the hologram vanished.

Seconds later, all the consoles, monitors and panels that had lit up returned to darkness.

Waiting.

## A FUN BUNCH OF GUYS FROM OUTER SPACE

All he'd done was ask what that flashing light meant! It was hardly the crime of the century, but the way Jason reacted, he might have been asking for a ninety-per-cent share in profits.

'Nothing!' Jason had screeched unexpectedly. 'Everything is just fine, all right? Stop asking stupid questions!'

Emile had tried to sit as far back in his seat as he could and not for the first time during their trip wished he was back on Dellah playing poker with Professor S and trying to track down the cute guy who delivered messages. Come to think of it, that cute guy delivering the message about Jason's arrival had been the start of all this. Maybe he'd give him a miss then, when he got back.

If he got back.

The trip had started badly when *Mother Fist* had suddenly lurched on leaving Dellah's atmosphere, like an ancient motor car backfiring. It looked so funny on the holovids he'd seen. Emile had asked what the problem was, only to have his head metaphorically bitten off by Jason, who had pointed at the seat belt, ordered Emile to strap his body down and his mouth with it.

Until they entered hyperlight - at which point Emile had just gasped at the sheer beauty of the elongated stars for a few seconds. But, apart from that, he'd kept his thoughts on Jason's piloting to himself.

Except when Jason mentioned they were dropping *out* of hyperlight, at which point the light had flashed, Emile had pointed it out, and all hell had broken loose.



Emile's question had been answered by events rather than by Jason. As they re-entered normal space (whatever that meant, but it was the phrase Jason used - Emile began to wonder whether Jason's phrases meant anything or were just made up to sound impressive) the *Mother Fist* seemed to almost crash into the largest spacecraft Emile had ever seen.

As he tried to pull the ship up and away, Jason's vocabulary took on a more colourful quality, with a turn of phrase that utilized some words that even Emile wouldn't have considered putting into the same sentence.

'I didn't expect anyone else to be out here,' he yelled. 'I mean, this area's supposed to be off limits.'

'Maybe they want to go to Ardethe as well,' volunteered Emile.

'Oh, of course, that would never have occurred to me.' Jason was wrestling with some strange kind of lever that seemed to direct the ship.

'Oh, pardon me,' Emile finally snapped. 'What would you like me to say then?'

'Preferably nothing,' Jason responded.

Emile had prepared to sulk at that point, except that a load of controls in front of him burst into flames, sending bits of glass, metal and plastic everywhere. Within seconds three long metallic arm things dropped out the ceiling and pointed at the fire. From one of them came a spluttering burst of foam, but the other two did nothing.

Yelping, Jason whacked at one of them and a quick spurt of foam came out of that.

'Well, hit the other one then,' he shouted above the noise at Emile.

Too terrified to do anything else, Emile gave the errant arm a bit of a tap.

'Hit the bugger, not ask it politely!'

Emile smashed at it with his fist, whereupon it snapped in two and fell to the floor, and an enormous, if brief, torrent of foam poured from the severed junction at the ceiling, not just putting the fire out, but covering most of Emile's legs.

'Gee, thanks, Emile. That helped.'

Emile had had enough. 'For God's sake, you told me to hit it, so I did. I didn't know this ship was falling apart!'

'It isn't falling apart!'

'It bloody is. Look at it!'

At which point they hit the atmosphere of the blue planet far too fast, were flung back into their seats by the sudden G-forces, and all Jason did was scream 'Shit! Shit! Shit!' half a dozen times.

'We're going to die' was Emile's best response, as he hoped that Jason would say something heroic and then pull the ship out of its dive and save them.

Instead Jason nodded his agreement. 'Yup, I think we are.'

This, of course, did not encourage Emile, who was trying hard not to cry, while thinking that his life would have been so much easier if he could have gone back home to his father, and coped with the hard graft that had been his normal existence.

He was not entirely sure at first if the cry from Jason was from fear or jubilation, but it was clearly the latter as the image of the expanse of rapidly approaching blue rock below suddenly gave way to the sky. Convinced his stomach was still on a rapid descent, and some way behind the ship, Emile was nevertheless equally happy. Jason had clearly been heroic and saved them.

'Hold tight, 'Meel, this could get difficult. I'm trying to ride the hot-air currents.'

Emile didn't understand a word of it, but yelled what he hoped was an encouraging 'Great!'

The ship actually seemed to bounce as if it was buffeting against something soft but solid rather than just air. Whatever it was, Emile was pleased to note that it slowed them down.

'Hang on, 'Meel! We're going to land.'

Which they did, somewhat bumpily, but in one piece. Unfortunately, even once landed, they didn't actually stop skidding across the blue rock until the *Mother Fist* smashed into something else.

'Ouch!'

‘Oh my God!’ Emile was unstrapping himself, staring through the view hatch. ‘We’ve hit another ship!’

‘Bully for them.’ Jason was unstrapping himself gingerly, checking nothing was broken.

‘Jason!’ Emile could not believe his new friend could be so unconcerned. ‘We might have hurt someone.’

Jason shook his head. ‘I’m not expecting to find anyone alive here.’

‘Well, if you go round ramming Administration shuttles, I’m not surprised.’ Emile was trying to open their exit. ‘Can I get out, please.’

‘Just checking the atmosphere, ‘Meel.’ Satisfied that they could breathe easily, Jason punched a button to release the hatch. Nothing happened.

‘Should I shove harder?’

‘Oh, ha-di-ha ha.’ Jason hit the switch again. ‘Damn. The crash must have blown out the controls. We’ll have to get some repairs done.’ He shot a look at Emile. ‘Hey, ‘Meel, you any good with a screwdriver?’

Emile shrugged. ‘Don’t see why not.’ He had no idea what a screwdriver was but assumed that it was some archaic device that would be well suited to dismantling this bucket of rust. Normal sonic tools or repair bots like the ones they had on the relay station were probably way out of Jason’s league.

Sometimes, Emile, you need to stop thinking with your heart and use your head. Right now, you could be knocking back one of those beer drinks with Tameka and helping Toosa-eL win at poker. Instead, you’re locked inside a stupid spaceship with a man who has that typical ratio that dictates that, the better the looks, the dimmer the brain.

Emile kicked the exit in frustration and it fell open, unfortunately allowing the surprised lad to overbalance and topple out on to the rock.

‘You all right?’

Jason was staring down at him.

‘Yeah, fine.’ Like Jason gave a damn. Oh well, at least he could check no one was hurt in the Administration shuttle.

Emile hauled himself up and scrambled towards the shuttle - the *Mother Fist* had hit the rear, so the open exit was easily accessible. Jason yelled something, but Emile couldn't be bothered to listen - he just ran in. And immediately realized what had caused Jason's alarm.

The shuttle rocked violently. It must have been near the edge of a cliff or something, and the shunt had pushed it almost over the edge. His extra weight had unbalanced it. All Emile could think to do was run to the rear and hope it would stop shaking and rebalance itself.

Sure enough, the rocking stopped and Emile caught his breath. There was no way he was going to get back out without starting it again, so no point in doing anything in panic.

He stared around the interior. Lots of seats, all empty. A few opened cupboards, and a wrecked radio panel to the left. He couldn't see the flight controls up front, but a pair of unmoving legs were visible through the seats.

And, by looking straight up front, he could see the sky and no land at all through the screens. Yup, he was indeed on the edge of a cliff.

'Emile?'

'Jason, I'm OK.'

'Where are you?'

'Near the back. There's a dead body near the front.'

'Right. Well they're not going anywhere then. Can you get to the exit?'

Emile said he couldn't and asked about the drop.

'Not very far,' Jason said, 'but there's no point in taking risks, all right?'

'About as much point as lying to me, Jason Kanel!' Emile took a deep breath. 'How big a drop is it really?'

'OK, OK. About three, maybe four, miles. It's a crater of some sort and if there's anything directly below... well if the shuttle goes over, it'll crash into that.'

'So?'

'So, 'Meel, *you* were the one concerned about survivors. If there are any, they might be in there, not expecting their

bloody great shuttle to drop on their heads because some arse decided to go exploring without using his brain first. OK?’

‘OK, already!’

‘Right, listen. I’m going to see if I can find anything to prop under the front and stop it tipping forward. But listen carefully.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘If it does start to drop, you’ve got no time to get out. You’ll not make the exit before it’s gone over, so jumping out will kill you. Don’t do it, OK?’

‘OK.’

‘Promise?’

‘Yes, I bloody well promise.’

‘All right, then. What I do want you to do is grab the rear seats tightly. These Administration things are actually quite well constructed and the seats shouldn’t detach themselves.’

‘*Shouldn’t?* Oh, great. Go on.’

‘Just hold on tight. The shuttle will, more than likely slide down the side of the crater, so that’ll hopefully slow the descent a bit.’

Jason was apparently about to add something else but it was transformed into a very vicious curse which Emile didn’t recognize but guessed it meant something bad was happening.

Sure enough, the shuttle lurched forward and Emile’s stomach leapt into his mouth. Emile himself rarely swore but the expletive he uttered at that point was both understandable and heartfelt.

He threw himself at the back of the seats, grabbing hold tightly before he realized he was no longer alone. Jason was holding on to another set of seats - he’d either jumped in for some reason, or fallen in.

Thirty seconds later, the shuttle stopped with an enormous shudder, hurling them both against the ceiling and then on to the right-angled floor, so they collapsed against the base of the seating, breathing hard.

Emile looked across at Jason. ‘Wow.’

Jason managed a smile. 'Hey, dad, that was great. Can we ride it again?' He hauled himself up and crawled towards the now upright exit. 'Well, let's hope no one was at home, because I was right.'

Shaking slightly, but relieved that Jason's idea (and confidence) about the seats had been good, Emile followed him out.

The shuttle had landed nose down amid a charred circle on the ground. Jason had found a few bits and pieces but nothing much.

'That's a blaster discharge mark. Something was here and someone wanted it got rid of.'

Emile shrugged. 'What about the guy in the shuttle?'

'I'll check.'

That was fine as far as Emile was concerned. Dead men's bodies weren't very high on his list of personal favourites. A few moments later, Jason re-emerged.

'OK, he was one Ensign Harries from the AMS *Trigan*. He was killed by a sharp twist to the neck, some time back I think. A couple of days at the least.'

'Not my fault then.' Emile was relieved.

'No,' said Jason. 'No, not *our* fault.' He looked at Emile and smiled. 'Remember, we're in this together, partner.' He looked up to the top of the crater. 'It's a long climb back up.'

'What's that, Jase?' Emile pointed at a tiny black speck in the clear blue sky above. It was getting closer. 'It looks like another ship.'

'It is. Probably a shuttle from the one we nearly collided with. And possibly coming to find us.'

'Do we want to be found?'

'Not really.' Jason sighed. 'Typically Bernice bloody Summerfield. She can't even get us stranded somewhere nice.'

'You nicked her crystal, Jase. It's not Professor S's fault.'

'Everything that happens is "Professor S's" fault when it goes wrong. It's a universal constant I live by.' Jason took something else from his pocket. It was a tiny green sphere,

about the size of a golfball, with a black stud on top. And it was glowing internally, a slow rhythmic pulse.

Emile had never seen anything like it. 'What's that?'

Jason was frowning, as if he didn't quite know the answer. 'A gift, from a friend of Benny's. It's a homing device, but I can only think of a couple of people who have one other than myself. I felt it activate in my pocket just now. I wonder why.'

'Maybe Benny's trying to contact you.'

'Nah, she'd just shout and we'd hear it from half a galaxy away. Besides which, she'd use this.' Jason tossed his personal communicator over to Emile. 'This is someone else.' He scanned the crater. 'But why did it activate now?'

'Low range?'

'Shouldn't be. Should have quite a long range, to be frank.' Jason tapped the sphere and it stopped pulsating.

'Maybe it's broken,' offered Emile.

Jason shrugged. 'Maybe. I wonder

Emile realized he was not going to get anything more out of Jason on the subject, so he concentrated on the approaching craft. 'It's getting bigger.'

'It's getting nearer, actually.'

'Yeah, I know that. I was being... oh, never mind. Should we hide?'

'Where?'

'The shuttle.'

'So long as you can cope with Ensign Harries' corpse, that's not a bad idea.'

Emile shrugged. 'Never snuggled up to a corpse. Try anything once.'

'Yeah, I'll bet. C'mon.'

They hurried back into the shuttle and, trying to ignore Harries' twisted and rather discoloured body, looked out through the screens as the dark-grey flitter began its descent into the crater.

'Could they have picked up the same signal as your homing device?' asked Emile.

Jason shrugged. 'Dunno. Doubt it though. Quality merchandise this. That's a scavenger flitter.'

‘A what?’

‘A scavenger. Full of prisoners doing their bit for society. Most of them are probably long-termers to whom dangerous work like this is better than just rotting away in prisons.’ Jason nodded as the ship settled on the blue rock, about sixty feet away from them. ‘I wonder what’s here that the Prison Service want.’

‘Same as us?’

‘Yeah. But we’re here illegally and not supposed to be around. They’re here on “official” business - but equally ought not to be. AMS only, I would have thought, around here.’

‘Except that the Administration Military Ship’s gone, this shuttle has a dead man in it...’

‘And someone blew up what was probably their camp. I can see where your thoughts are going, ‘Meel.’

Emile smiled. ‘Yeah. Someone, somewhere, is still alive. And probably watching us.’

‘And them.’ Jason pointed at the group of green-clad women slowly coming down a ramp from the rear of the flitter.

‘So, do you think these prisoners could be hunting us?’

‘Nah. Maybe as a sideline they’ll be aware of us, but the Prison Service won’t waste time and resources looking for a ship like mine. Ours.’

Emile tried to shift and get more comfortable, but slipped slightly, his foot landing on Harries’ chest. And went a bit further than it should, followed by a deeply offensive smell.

‘Oh, well done, ‘Meel.’ Jason did not look down either. ‘I really needed to know what his last lunch was.’

‘I think I’m going to faint. Or puke. Or both.’

‘Do either, and I’ll leave you here.’

‘Jason! You wouldn’t!’

‘I’ll think about it.’

Lloyd stood at the base of the ramp, checked that there was no one around other than her fellow prisoners, and then



activated the remote. The ramp slid silently back up into the ship.

‘Wow. How nice. Do we stay here for life or go exploring?’ Townsend stuffed her hands in her pockets.

Charley Connor was wandering around in a circle. ‘Cobalt, I think.’

‘What d’you mean “cobalt”?’

Connor pointed at the edges of the crater. ‘This isn’t natural, Marianne. And the land goes up at the top. Nothing pushed this down: charges blew this crater into existence. Cobalt by the look.’

Jay Hallett stood beside her. ‘Yeah. You’d need something like that to get through this rock as well.’

Townsend was furious. ‘Oh, great. Bloody cobalt bombs and we’re standing in the middle of it. The radiation is probably killing us with each breath.’

Connor dug a scanner out of her pocket. ‘Nah, it’s like I thought. This was done ages ago. No radiation here for a good two hundred years.’

Jeni Grierson shivered. ‘It’s cold!’

Townsend laughed. ‘Hey, Grierson, forgot to pack your winter woollies?’

Grierson shrugged. ‘I’m sorry, Marianne. I didn’t think to.’

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think to.” Townsend and Hallett laughed, until Connor pushed between them.

‘For Christ’s sake, Mari, lay off the girl.’

Townsend pushed back. ‘Don’t you start, Charley. I’ve enough on my plate without you doing a Lloyd on me.’

Lloyd came up behind Townsend and spoke directly into her ear. ‘Oh, yes? And what exactly is “a Lloyd”?’

Townsend just stared straight ahead, sneering slightly. ‘Did you squeak?’

Lloyd ignored her and indicated to Connor. ‘Charley, you take Townsend and Hallett that way. Grierson and me’ll head forwards. Oh, and Townsend. Be a good girl guide and don’t get lost.’

She passed some ration packs out. Hallett pointed at the crashed AMS *Trigan* shuttle.

‘Should we pick that up?’

Lloyd nodded. ‘Yeah, but later. No point in knacking ourselves when we might need to save energy for something bigger and further away. Plus the fact it could be a steep climb.’

‘We’re going up there?’

Lloyd had had enough. ‘For God’s sake, Townsend, use your brain. Apart from the shuttle, there’s bugger all else in this crater. Where d’you suggest we look?’

‘Well, why didn’t you land the flitter up top, Jay?’

Hallett stepped back. ‘All right, don’t blame me. BABE preprogrammed our route, OK? I just press the crukking buttons.’

‘So, if we’re all finished moaning?’

Connor nodded. ‘OK, how long, Siobhan?’

‘Alexander the Great wants a swift lift-off. Eastwards, Charley. Back here in a hundred and twenty.’

‘You’re the boss.’

‘And your wish is our command,’ added Hallett tritely.

Lloyd glanced towards the downed Administration shuttle. ‘Come on, Jeni, let’s take a look.’

As the two of them wandered away Townsend stared at them. ‘You two make me sick. “Oh yes, Lloyd”, “Oh no, Lloyd”, “Oh three bloody bags full, Lloyd”. You’d follow her to the ends of the Earth wouldn’t you?’

But Hallett and Connor had already wandered off, too familiar with Townsend’s griping for it to have any meaning or relevance. They had jobs to do.

‘Damn. Two of them are coming towards us. I wonder if I could pick ‘em off without the other three seeing.’

‘Jason!’ Emile couldn’t believe Jason Kane could be so savage. ‘My God! You can’t just kill them!’

Jason just shrugged. “‘Can’t” or “mustn’t”?”

“‘Mustn’t”!’

‘Well, I can’t anyway. My blaster’s back in the *Mother Fist*, which, thanks to you, is two or three miles above us.’

'I wondered how long it would take before I got the blame for that.'

Jason smiled. 'Oh, I've been blaming you for ages. Just didn't say anything until now.'

'Oh, thanks.' Emile stepped back slightly. 'Next time you want me to save your life, just remind me of that, and I won't bother.'

Jason stopped watching the women and looked instead into Emile's chubby face, as if thinking back to their initial meeting on the planet of the Sunless, a few months before.

'Did I ever say thank you?'

Emile shrugged. 'No. But it doesn't matter. That was then.'

Jason shook his head. 'No, you're wrong. It does matter. I would have died if not for you. You were willing to sacrifice your life for mine. Yet you didn't even know me.'

'You are - were — Benny's husband. She loves you. You contributed something to her life. All I did was get in everyone's way and piss off my dad a lot. Seemed a good idea at the time.'

Jason shrugged. 'Yeah, right. Like you thought all that at the time.'

'No. But I thought about it afterwards. And when Professor S asked me. At the time, I just thought it was the easiest way to stop them killing you. The fact it might have killed me didn't really cross my mind. I'm not that selfless really.'

Jason smiled suddenly. 'Well, thank you 'Meel. But you're still a right pain in the arse now.'

'Always do what you're best at, Jason. That's my new motto.' Emile nodded back outside. 'Now, what are they up to?'

The two approaching women had stopped and were examining something on the ground. One of them, the one who had been barking orders earlier, knelt down and started pulling on something. Jason and Emile tried not to react when she suddenly fell on to her bum as whatever she was tugging finally gave way.

‘It’s a hatchway.’ Jason pulled himself up an inch further, getting dangerously close to being in view. ‘There’s something beneath this crater.’

‘I’m hungry’ was Emile’s instant and rather heartfelt response.

Jason ignored him. ‘We need to go down there.’

‘If I don’t eat something soon, I’ll faint. Then you’ll have to carry me.’

Jason gave Emile a look which clearly indicated that it was far more likely he’d just leave him where he dropped.

Emile opted to ignore the rumblings from his tummy. ‘Actually, Jase, I’m not that hungry.’

‘Good. I want to get down under the surface.’

‘Why?’

Jason held up the small pulsating green globe. ‘Because it started glowing brighter when that hatchway was opened.’

Emile pointed. ‘Look. They’re off - going to get the others presumably. Shall we go now?’

Jason nodded. ‘In a few seconds.’ He looked back at Emile. ‘How fast can you run?’

‘Fast enough. I’ve had practice.’

Jason nodded. ‘As you’ve been hanging around with my ex, I can believe it.’

There were times when Emile Mars-Smith could open his mouth and say the most appalling things without realizing he had done so. There were other times, luckily far fewer, when he could open his mouth and say the most appalling things and do it knowingly. And then there were the rare times when he just spoke the first, wholly inappropriate thing that came into his mind and actually knew before he spoke he would regret it.

This was one of those.

‘Why did you split up? I mean, you obviously both still love each other and everything. It seems so stupid. She’s fab, you’re cool, together you’re just -’

And Emile saw in Jason’s eyes an amount of pain, hurt and sadness that was probably always there but rarely so brutally uncovered.

So he shut up and found something more interesting to do. While Jason, without speaking, slipped out of the shuttle and began walking towards the now vacated hatchway.

Lloyd and Grierson were walking back to their shuttle, to await the return of the other three. Lloyd was shaking her head as she again surveyed the crater. There was something very strange going on on Ardethe. That hatchway had opened too easily, and why was that crashed Administration shuttle the only sign that anyone else had been here when there ought to have been more indications of the missing archaeologists. Still, they *were* missing...

Grierson tapped her on the shoulder. 'Siobhan, could a cobalt bomb really do this?'

Lloyd shook her head. 'I doubt it. Maybe a ship packed with them. But even so. A crater like this... Anyway it doesn't really matter how it happened. It just did. Let's see if the pickings are rich.'

Grierson shielded her eyes from the sun, trying to see if the others were near the ship.

'Siobhan? If it was a ship, do you think anyone was on it?'

Lloyd turned three hundred and sixty degrees, trying to spot the others. 'Not unless they were suicidal to the point of extravagance.'

'What?'

Lloyd shrugged. 'Well, why kill yourself in an explosion as spectacular as this when a space walk is just as efficient?'

Grierson shuddered at the thought. 'That's horrible.'

'Bombs tend to be, Jeni. Didn't they have them on your planet?'

Grierson thought about this. 'I think so. But they weren't used much.'

'Nice place,' the older woman laughed. Grierson's innocence - although Townsend would say it was naivety - was rather sweet and attractive amid the sour and petty bitchings of the other women. She just hoped Grierson could survive the bleakness of this 'career' to grow and mature into the woman

she deserved to become. 'Remind me to visit when we're paroled.'

Grierson immediately latched on to this, tugging at Lloyd's sleeve. 'You really think we'll get parole?'

Lloyd knelt down and began scraping at some of the blue rock, trying to work out what it was made of. It was very strange. Almost as if it were... No, that was daft. Oh, where was Connor when she was needed? *She* was the scientific one among them. 'I hope so. Three months with Tolland and Townsend is worse than a life sentence, I can assure you.'

After a few moments, Grierson asked, 'Are you a lifer, then?'

Lloyd continued scratching at the rocks, ignoring the girl. Grierson eventually asked again.

'I've told you before, Jeni. I'd rather not discuss it.'

'Sorry.' Grierson sat beside her. 'I don't think we're going to find any metal up here. Maybe down through that hatchway thing, though?'

'You might be right.' Lloyd stood up, blowing blue dust off her fingers. 'I wonder how Townsend's doing.'

'I wish I understood why you hate her so much. I mean, you are from the same colony. That's rare on these ships, isn't it? Central told me I wouldn't be with anyone else from Oriola 6. I wish I was.'

Lloyd laughed, humourlessly. 'Gee, thanks! My company not good enough for you then?'

Grierson was immediately defensive, again not seeing the subtleties of Lloyd's cynicism. Yeah, sometimes Grierson's inexperience of life could be a bit of a burden as well.

'Oh, you know what I mean,' Grierson replied. 'You've been wonderful. You've looked after me better than my own mother ever did. But it's not the same. Sometimes I lie awake at night listening to Charlene, lay and Marianne laughing —'

'Or rowing with me!'

'And I think I'm really homesick. I mean, there's not much there but it is still home. I want to go back. It's just not fair. I shouldn't be here.'

Lloyd had heard this before from so many others back at Kamp Konkordia. But there was something about Jeni Grierson, that odd little spark that had drawn Lloyd to her. Her conviction, her earnest belief that she genuinely was innocent.

'Yeah, well, we all say that. But telling the truth in Administration courts these days is of little importance to them.' Lloyd began to continue towards their shuttle.

'Siobhan? Why are you here?'

Lloyd was suddenly angry - the blue haze of the planet gave way, momentarily, to a flash of red. 'I don't want -' Then she sighed. If Grierson didn't get some kind of answer after all these weeks, she'd have this for the rest of their time aboard the scavenger ship. 'Ah, you wouldn't understand. My crime is, if you like, one of the mind. It needn't worry you. Only a colony like Kastor Major would consider it a crime.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry.'

If anyone else had said that, Lloyd would have scoffed. But Grierson probably didn't even understand that she was prying. One day, she'd have to explain, preferably before Townsend blurted it out. But how would an innocent like Grierson react? Understanding? Unlikely. Shock? Probably. Horror and then run away? Fear for her life? Yeah, that was quite likely. And Lloyd would lose her. Like she'd lost... like she'd lost Joolz. After eight years.

Lloyd carried on walking, not catching Grierson's eye. 'We ought to find Charley and the others before it gets too dark. Have to report our failure to Alexander the Great.'

A voice came across the crater from their left.

'Lloyd? What are you doing? Anything interesting?' It was Townsend, who had Connor and Hallett with her as they, too, headed towards the shuttle.

'Hell, we've been having a party. Any other stupid questions?'

They grouped together. Connor grabbed Lloyd's hands, looking at the blue dust particles. 'Find anything?'

'Yeah, a thousand blocks of platinum just standing around with a "please scavenge me" sign on them. Does it look like it?'

Connor shrugged. 'I only asked.'

'Yeah, sorry Charley. This place scares the crap out of me, but hell knows why.'

Townsend shivered. 'Bloody typical! Planet's got no metal. Got nothing but miles of bloody blue rocks and wind. And it's starting to get colder.'

Connor looked at her scanner. 'Marianne's right, Siobhan. That's quite odd really.'

Hallett shivered as well. 'Charley, according to you everything we've seen for the last half-hour has been odd. What now?'

Charley Connor tapped her scanner. 'Marianne said it's cold. It is. Yet it's daylight. Deserts of rock tend to get cold only at night - especially when there's only one sun like here.'

Lloyd pointed to the edges of the crater. 'Maybe the cobalt bombs screwed up the atmosphere or something.'

Townsend rubbed her arms again. 'Oh, who cares? Let's get back to the ship and see whether Tolland has got any more daft ideas.'

But Connor wasn't listening, tapping on her scanner again. 'If it was cobalt that caused this crater, there's little trace of how or why.'

Grierson, who had sat near the base of the ship, looked up at them. 'Siobhan thinks it might have been a whole ship packed with cobalt bombs that crashed here.'

'Oh, Lloyd's taking your job, Charley. Chief Scientific Brainbox.' Townsend laughed. So Hallett laughed as well. Connor just sighed.

'At least I'm thinking, *then* talking, and not vice versa.' Lloyd sat beside Grierson.

Townsend nudged Hallett. 'Oh, and I thought she had little Miss Innocent there do all her talking.'

Connor was examining information on her scanner. 'Siobhan. Look at this.'



Lloyd was up and beside her. The dust was not registering on any recognized geological information banks.

'This is an Earth-type planet, right? I mean we can breathe here easily, gravity's normal, everything's fine, if a bit cold. So why aren't the planet's minerals showing up as recognizable elements?' Connor frowned. 'Siobhan, do you feel OK?'

Lloyd nodded. 'Fine. Why?'

'Just wanted to check that this dust isn't toxic.'

Townsend perked up instantly. 'Toxic? Oh, great, and we've been kicking around in it for ages.'

'Oh, shut up, Townsend,' snapped Lloyd. 'No, it isn't poisonous. I feel fine.'

'For now,' Hallett muttered.

Lloyd shot a look towards Grierson, who was staring at her own hands and boots, trying to spot if any lethal dust was soaking into her pores and killing her.

'Oh, for Christ's sake! The dust is not killing us, OK?' Lloyd glared at Connor and whispered, 'Thanks for that additional concern, Charley. We really needed that.'

Connor shrugged. 'Still doesn't explain why -' She quickly looked hard at Lloyd. 'I need to get back to the *KayBee 2*, Siobhan. Dr Njobe's equipment's better than this portable stuff.'

'What have you worked out, Charley?'

Connor shook her head. 'A good scientist doesn't offer guesses. Only facts.'

'Unless, of course, it's suggestions that we've all been poisoned.'

Connor smiled. 'Nah, that was just my idea of a joke.'

'Great. Like, thanks. I wanted that kind of joke today.' Lloyd clapped her hands. 'OK, guys, there is something we found.' She told the other three about the discovery of the hatchway.

Connor nodded. 'Well, I guess we go down. This dust can wait. It's not going anywhere after all.'

Townsend was, as Lloyd had anticipated, cautious. Hallett just agreed with whoever shouted loudest.

'It might be dangerous,' Townsend offered.

‘If you want to go back to Tolland and tell him we found something but were too frightened to investigate, there’s the shuttle. I don’t fancy having Cassius spacing us, though.’

‘Will we need some cutting equipment?’ Hallett began to head into the shuttle.

‘No, I opened it,’ Lloyd said.

‘How easily?’ Townsend was still apprehensive.

‘It wasn’t that easy but —’

‘But easy enough,’ finished Connor. ‘A trap?’

‘Could be.’

Hallett was confused. ‘Why? Who’s the trap for?’

‘Us?’

Townsend snorted. ‘And I thought I was the paranoid one! Honestly, Charley, why would anyone set a trap for us?’

Lloyd interrupted. ‘Maybe not us exactly. But for someone.’

Grierson stood up. ‘What I don’t understand is why there’s a hatch in the middle of this rock.’

Lloyd snapped her fingers. ‘I wonder if there was a building of some sort here and the bombs razed it?’

Townsend looked in the direction that Lloyd and Grierson had walked, trying to spot the hatch. All that could be seen was the dark blob on the bottom of the crater’s side that was the Administration shuttle. ‘What’s your hatch for then? Sewage?’

‘Possibly.’ Lloyd began chivvying them along. ‘We need to get there and look at it. Charley, can your scanner tell us whether there are metals below?’

‘Yep,’ said Connor.

‘Right, let’s go.’

They headed back to the hatchway, Townsend whingeing about the danger and Hallett backing her up - of course. Lloyd and Connor were swapping notes while Grierson just walked behind them, occasionally trying to wipe the rock dust off her hands in case it was poison after all. Within fifteen minutes they had reached their target.

Hallett produced a bottle of water from her backpack, offering it around. Each woman in turn took a swig, although

Townsend took more than her fair share. No one bothered complaining - they expected her to anyway.

Lloyd was on the ground, her arm dipping into the darkness. 'There's some sort of ladder thing. Under here.'

'Strong enough to take our weight?' Townsend asked.

Lloyd wasn't sure. 'Townsend! Your boot, quickly!'

'Use your own.'

'Here's mine.' Grierson passed a boot over.

'Thanks.' Lloyd whacked the rungs of the ladder hard. 'Seems strong enough.'

Grierson sniffed. 'It smells. What is it?'

'By the Goddess!' That was Townsend. 'I hate to say it but, awful as it is, I recognize the smell. Decay. Rotting something.'

'It's dreadful,' agreed Hallett, not wanting to be left out.

Lloyd sniffed a bit, then breathed deeply. 'Right. Now we're over that, who's for a trip down?' She looked expectantly at the group. She knew Grierson would go with her, and Charley Connor certainly - her curiosity was always getting the better of her. Probably what got her locked up in the first place. Hallett would follow whatever lead Townsend made.

'Lady, are you mad?'

'Need I remind you, Townsend, we're here to work? Like it or not. This lid and this ladder are metallic. It might lead to more metal. In turn, that might lead to parole.' Lloyd pointed downward. 'Shall we scavenge our way to freedom?'

Townsend folded her arms, looking first at Hallett, then Connor and Grierson and finally, with a sneer, back to the hatchway.

'Who are you trying to fool, Lloyd? Me, the kid or yourself?'

Lloyd threw Grierson's boot back to the young woman, who slipped it back on. 'Let's go.'

Townsend bent down as Lloyd lowered herself into the darkness, so their faces were level. 'No way! I've had it with your orders! You've no right to make us go down there! It might be dangerous - the smell ought to tell you that. Suppose whatever died down there is diseased. We'd walk right into it. We could die as well.'

Lloyd nodded. 'Fair enough. But I can't wait to tell Ghoti and DeJoine when we get back. They like a good laugh.'

Townsend licked her lips, then slowly stood up. 'Blackmail, is it?'

'Yeah,' said Lloyd. 'And you're so bloody hard you'll succumb. Now, everyone follow me.'

'Oxygen masks!' Connor backed away. 'I'll go get some. It'll help us filter out the smell, even if we don't need 'em.'

Lloyd sighed - she was anxious to get exploring so she could make a report to Tolland. He was probably shouting at his fish by now. Nevertheless Connor was probably right: oxygen masks would be a good precaution.

She leant on the side of the hatchway while the others sat on the blue rock, Grierson nervously trying not to get any dust on her skin.

Sometimes that girl could be too neurotic for her own good.

\* \* \*

'Now what!'

Jason thumped the side of the console at the front of the crashed shuttle. He and Emile had been about to go down the hatchway when Emile had seen the women start to come towards them. The two men had darted back to the shuttle as fast as they could, praying they had not been spotted.

Their luck had held so far but instead of going down, the five women were just nattering.

'It's a universal constant, 'Meel, that if three or more women gather in one spot, gossip will occur. A bloody great meteor could be about to land on their heads, and still they'd discuss the weather, the soap powders they used and the latest in fashionable G-strings!'

Emile opted not to reply - partly because he found Jason's flashes of sexism annoying, but mostly because he had never quite worked out what a G-string was for.

Instead he decided he would show how much better he was than Jason and practise the art of patience.

In his office aboard the *KayBee 2*, Oliver Tolland was impatiently waiting for some report from Lloyd and the

others. He had rearranged his paperwork a few times, played virtual solitaire, reread Njobe's report on Brutus's condition at least twice, and his final option had been to talk to his fish again. That relieved stress and boredom. He knew that because he'd read it in a colonial management book once. 'Hello, Guppy. How are you then?' He blew a kiss to the fish but for once they swam on, unaware of his presence. 'Computer? How long until we meet up with the supply ship?'

BABE's features, still as Marilyn Monroe, wobbled into his line of vision, just above the fish tank.

'Fourteen days, Governor Tolland.'

'Oh. Well, any ideas on what we're picking up next? More prisoners? More scavenger jobs?'

'Their last message indicated routine inspections and new cutting equipment. Our current materials are low on efficiency.'

'You mean the cutters or the prisoners?' he laughed.

'Is that a joke, Governor Tolland?'

Tolland was about to treat the question with the contempt he felt it deserved, but changed his mind. 'Never mind.' He pointed at the fish tank. 'Do you like fish, computer?'

Although BABE's virtual features could not be programmed to actually have a look of impassive disinterest, it came very close at that moment as far as Tolland was concerned.

'Do you really require an answer, Governor Tolland?'

'No.' He sighed and headed back to sit behind his desk, shuffling a few more papers for the tenth time. 'This is boring. At least in my day we had wretched natives to talk to and chivvy about. Now what have I got? Ruddy backchatting lump of wires and circuits that can't even pretend to be vaguely civil! Doesn't care much for Guppy or Matilda, either. Ruddy machine! Didn't get to be governor just by working with machines, you know. It was back-breaking hard work!'

He looked up to give BABE a piece of his mind, but the face had vanished. Without permission!

Bloody place was going to the dogs, eh? Which reminded him: time for a chat with Cassius, boost his spirits and all that. Just because Brutus was ill, well, wasn't right for the

other one to get depressed and broody. If the prisoners saw that, by jove, they'd get out of control. And he might have to space one. Set an example and all that.

Which would, at least, alleviate this dreadful boredom!

*'Hi, this is DNN, bringing you all the Dellah news from the planet and beyond. I'm Jake Garrett.*

*'Admin-Proctor Lucinda Vrana has won a landslide victory in the Administration elections, emerging with a thirty-eight-percent lead over her nearest rivals. Following the successful resolution of the crisis on Solaados, the Admin-Proctor was very positive about the future of the sector's Administration.'*

*"I am feeling very positive about the future of the Administration in this sector of the galaxy."*

*'Other news in today concerns discoveries made by scholars and scientists troubled by the recent loss of the expedition to the legendary planet of Ardethe and the discovery of a previously unknown tenth planet in the rim system. Could this new planet be the one where the AMS Trigan made its tragic landing instead of Ardethe? And how does a whole new planet just appear where previously there wasn't one? We asked Professor Zooss of the Krytell Science Foundation for his theories on this bizarre phenomenon.*

*"This is a very bizarre phenomenon you have asked for my theories on. You see, planets do not just appear like this - either hundreds of years of astronomers and cartographers have been in error, which is to say the least unlikely, or the planet has always been there but invisible. This would suggest that someone or something deliberately hid the planet from our view and only now has opted to let the rest of the universe see it. Bear in mind the outer rims are vastly unexplored. The Trigan was, I believe, the first ship to make the journey in many years and, if the old stories are true, many previous expeditions have resulted in the inexplicable loss of said expeditions. I have never believed in myths or legends but I do find it possible that if there is some intelligence overseeing this new planet, now the fourth in the system, maybe they have decided to make their presence felt."*

*‘Professor Pul Zooss of the Krytell Science Foundation this morning.*

*‘Of course, it could just be a planet on an elliptical orbit according to our science team, but, hey, who are we to argue with the experts?’*

*‘This has been DNN, bringing you all the Dellah news from the planet and beyond. I’m Jake Garrett.’*

Ryne was flicking through the channels on the broadcast monitor, trying to ignore a channel devoted to the latest hyperdrive facilities available to every kind of ship except the *KayBee 2*. He flicked again as Jake Garrett’s perpetually annoying smile blurred into a weather report delivered by a pouting girl in nothing but a small pair of red panties, and who had delicious auburn hair and very large breasts. Ryne wondered when he would ever get to the girl of his dreams.

Blummer meanwhile was checking a couple of things via a pad with the pilot. Or at least, the pilot’s cybernetic subconscious.

‘Doesn’t say much, does he?’ Blummer said pointlessly.

‘Smokey likes him.’

‘Smokey likes anyone.’

‘Not true. Didn’t like that little Pakhar customs guy on that stupid tollport.’

‘That,’ Blummer said slowly, as if Ryne were a total imbecile, ‘was because Pakhars look like large hamsters. Smokey is quite partial to hamsters, but our Pakhar official did not like the way Smokey looked at him.’

Ryne shrugged. ‘Fairdos.’

Blummer sat back at the dinner table. ‘OK, so tiddly-winks is out. How about a game of cards?’

‘Yeah. Happy Families?’

Blummer coughed. ‘Ah. Just remembered. We can’t.’

‘Why not?’ Ryne was immediately suspicious.

‘Some of the cards are missing.’

Ryne slowly put his magazine down, folded his hands across his lap and took a deep breath. ‘When, Blummer? My old mam gave me that set. Her farewell present when I left

the colony to join the service. What have you gone and done with 'em?'

Blummer smiled at him insincerely. 'Well, remember that big orange lady from Cantrya?' Ryne nodded slowly, fearing what was coming. 'Well,' Blummer continued, munching, 'you remember she sort of fell for me...'

'I thought it was the other way around, actually.'

Blummer shrugged. 'Whatever. Anyway, she said she wanted something to remember me by.'

'Yeah, and so you told me you were going to give her your big purple egg timer.'

'Ah, yeah, well, Cantryans don't like eggs, apparently. So I offered her my heart. Well, the King, Queen, Knave and Ace of Hearts to be precise. A sort of... joke, really

Ryne sighed. 'Well, let's play Happy Families without the Hearts then.'

Blummer stopped eating. 'Well, I meant to tell you this, Ryne lad. Honest I did. But you see -'

'No.' Ryne held up his hands. 'No, I don't want to know. I just don't know what I'm going to tell my old mam next month.'

Blummer frowned. 'Ryne, lad?'

'Yeah?'

'Ryne, lad, your old mam died last summer when her aerosled ran out of gas on the snowscapes of Frijor III.'

'So? I can still write to her, can't I? "Don't forget to write every month." That was the last thing she ever said to me.'

Blummer nodded. 'Oh. I thought the last thing she ever said to you was "Here, have a pack of cards for the trip, son."'

Ryne ignored him. 'Anyway, I still write to her. And it's a lot cheaper than flowers for her grave.'

'That's not entirely surprising, lad. She hasn't got a grave. They couldn't find enough of her to sweep up to fill a matchbox.'

'Exactly. That's why I write. Because there isn't a grave to send flowers to.' Ryne stood up and headed back to the flashing lights that weren't flashing. 'Now, you go and annoy the cat or something. I've got work to do.'



Aware that he was likely to be the centre of Blummer's attention, Smokey the cat hurried to the door and vanished.

The corridors around the command module were dark, with loads of small holes and ventilation-shaft entrances which didn't close properly. Smokey made quite a habit of exploring those, imagining he was tracking down the Mutant Mice of Mogar, ready to destroy them on behalf of his human masters.

Truth was, since losing his left eye, Smokey wasn't that good at catching anything, mouse or otherwise. Instead, he spent his days sleeping, shedding hair and strolling around the dark recesses of the ship, hoping to find something interesting to do.

The life of a space cat with a red eye patch definitely had its dull moments. But there are times when, as tends to happen with cats, their hair begins to prickle and stand on end and their keen senses tell them that something odd is going to happen. Not necessarily dangerous, but definitely out of the ordinary.

As Smokey patrolled his regular haunts, daydreaming about Mutant Mice, his fur began to rise, his ears flattened slightly and his nose twitched. Smokey didn't know what was going to happen, but he knew something was and staying inside his human-free corridors and ventilator shafts was probably the safest thing to do.

Emile found Jason just outside the crashed shuttle. They had watched the women go down the hatchway and Jason had immediately gone outside, telling Emile to stay put. After three minutes, his curiosity (and his inability not to fidget) got the better of Emile and he emerged from the shuttle and walked slap into Jason.

'Jase?'

Jason was staring at the little pulsating green globe. "Meel, I think the signal is coming from down there.'

'One of those women?'

Jason shook his head. 'They've had a good head start. Now we ought to follow.'

Oh my God, thought Emile. Here we go. He touched Jason's shoulder. 'Are you sure it's safe?'

Jason appeared to consider this for a moment, then shrugged. 'No, I doubt it's safe. You stay here and see if you can get the ship up and running.'

'Up your arse, Kane!' Emile stood up to his full five-foot-not-very-much-more and realized he just about came up to Jason's Adam's apple. 'I'm coming with you. You need someone to watch your back, because I can't fly us out of here.' Emile chose to ignore the fact that the Administration shuttle was wrecked and their own *Mother Fist* wasn't in much better shape. With or without Jason, getting off Ardethe, or wherever they were, was going to be their biggest problem.

Jason put a hand on Emile's shoulder. 'C'mon then, faithful companion. Let us venture unto the jaws of death.'

Emile swallowed hard and followed Jason out towards the hole in the ground.

Deep below, Jay Hallett was the last down the ladder and so last to tread into the already mushy pile of something at the bottom. Whatever it was, it stank, and the previous women's feet had already made it resemble crushed grapes at a vineyard.

'Goddess, what the hell is this?' she moaned.

'A body,' muttered Charley Connor. 'Dead a few days only.'

'It stinks.'

'Oh, I hadn't noticed that. So it does.'

Hallett sighed and followed Connor into a large metallic tunnel where she could see the others, just, silhouetted by a faint orange glow.

'It's dark.'

'Hadn't noticed that either,' snapped Connor. 'Jay, if saying anything useful is difficult, just shut up for now.'

They hurried after the others and carried on through a doorway and into a huge chamber lined with metal pipes and strange carvings.

‘Metal. At least that’s something,’ muttered Connor, before going through an opposite doorway where she and Hallett found themselves on a thin bridge over what seemed to be a vast bottomless pit. The walls around them, going straight up and down, were marked with ornate carvings, scoured out of the natural blue rock. The lighting was far better here, good enough to see that Lloyd, Townsend and Grierson were crouching over a variety of dead bodies.

Townsend of course was complaining, as if the people had died there simply to inconvenience her. ‘It stinks like hell. If I pass any more corpses, I’ll scream.’

Lloyd gently rolled a corpse over and Hallett and Connor had caught up enough to notice that some decomposing innards were oozing on to her hands. ‘Odd, that.’

Townsend laughed coldly. ‘You been talking to Charley?’

Lloyd poked around a bit. ‘If you were looking, Townsend, you’d have seen evidence of how these people died. A hell of a lot of damage to the bodies.’

‘Oh, very astute, Miss Einstein. Bearing in mind most of the flesh has rotted into gunge, how do you reach that conclusion?’

‘The areas of the body that are decaying quicker are all vital areas. These people were shot, deliberately and carefully to kill them efficiently. We’re not talking a casual gun battle here: we’re talking deliberate murder. Look, we’ve seen dead men and women -’

Grierson was hovering near another body. ‘And children.’

Connor was looking. ‘Well, students. The missing archaeologists, Siobhan?’

Lloyd shrugged. ‘Could be. This lot are wearing AMS uniforms. I don’t think they shot each other. They were shot from that side of the bridge, from the way they - and we - came. Someone in their own party at a guess. Someone trained to shoot these particular areas of the body for maximum damage.’

Townsend coughed. ‘Amazing what a medical degree can do for you.’

Grierson looked over at Lloyd. 'I didn't know you were a doctor, Siobhan.'

'There's a lot more I could tell you, Jeni, about leader Lloyd.' Townsend smiled. 'With lots of gruesome details.'

Grierson surprised Hallett with the strength in her reply. 'I don't think Siobhan would want you to tell me, thank you, Marianne.'

Townsend took a step back in surprise. 'Oh, my goodness! It walks, it talks, it obeys without question. Just your type, Lloyd.'

Lloyd's voice was quiet, with something in it that Hallett hadn't heard before. 'Sorry, Townsend?'

There was a pause, then Townsend shrugged and looked at the dead people scattered across the bridge. 'Nothing, Lloyd.'

Lloyd stood suddenly and stretched. 'As I was saying -'

Townsend was immediately back on form. 'We get the message, Lloyd. You know your medicine, your Administration blasters and how to kill people efficiently. Does any of that help us find any metal?'

'Oh, just keep exercising your jaw, Townsend. Don't try to think any of this through.'

Townsend bristled. 'Look, I've had just about enough of you and your superior -'

Lloyd grabbed Townsend, pushing her back to the very edge of the bridge. Unable to react quickly enough, Townsend scrabbled slightly but only resulted in losing her footing, and her face drained of colour as she realized she was suspended from the edge of the bridge, ready to fall unknown thousands of feet to her death. Only Lloyd could stop her dropping, by maintaining her grip on the collar of Townsend's catsuit.

Hallett took a step forward, but Connor held a hand up warningly. This was their fight, their battle of wills. Lloyd was Top Dog and it was up to her, not them, to take whatever course of action she wanted to.

'I'll talk as I see fit, Townsend. Just try for once to use that lump of grey dough between your ears. Why did they die? Why come down here? To escape the radiation from a ship full of cobalt bombs or for some other reason? What were

they doing that someone, probably from their own ranks, murdered them. And, in that case, where the hell are the survivors?’

Townsend stared at her, sweating despite the cold. She spoke slowly and deliberately. ‘OK, Lloyd, you’ve made your point. I’m sorry. But now you listen. I don’t give a damn about these corpses! I think we ought to get out of here now and rethink everything we know. And when we get back to the *KayBee 2*, I’m going to tell Tolland exactly what I think of your bloody leadership - if I’m still alive to complain.’

Lloyd lifted her a little higher and a little further away from the bridge. Hallett could see the biceps on her right arm bulging with the strain, her calf muscles in her legs taut with power as they held her body in place despite the unbalanced weight in her hand. ‘Townsend?’ Lloyd hissed.

‘What now?’

‘Shut it! Unless you’ve got something useful to say.’ Effortlessly Lloyd lifted Townsend back on to the bridge and released her. As Townsend dropped on to her haunches to get her equilibrium and balance back, Hallett released the deep breath she hadn’t even realized she had been holding. With a wry smile, she saw Connor and Grierson similarly exhale.

Lloyd turned to them all. ‘Look. This bridge is metallic, right? About the only thing that is. Which means it was constructed and there may be more further on. We take that and work backwards, OK? I say we go on now.’

Connor agreed, and so did Grierson. Obviously. Hallett threw a look to Townsend, but she was still getting her breath back. Hallett was going to make a decision by herself. If she sided with Townsend, she would be doing exactly what Lloyd expected. But if she said they should go on, Townsend would kill her.

Lloyd suddenly continued walking. ‘Three against two. No contest.’

Hallett spoke quickly. ‘I was going to say we should go on anyway!’

As Lloyd turned to stare at her, surprise and a very faint smile on her face, Hallett tried to avoid catching Townsend's eye.

'Oh, you do, do you? Maybe we don't want to go on just to satisfy your death wish.' Townsend still didn't get up.

Lloyd sighed. 'Listen. We're on a job and in no position to argue. If we go back and report some dead AMS troopers and a couple of students with no further investigation, we'll lose any hope of parole. Convicted prisoners are of no real use except for missions like this. We're useless mouths to feed who are allowed to do what we do as long as we do it well. No, Townsend, I don't relish this any more than you do. But I accept it. We could've been executed but we're still alive. I'd quite like to try to stay that way.'

'And you consider walking into a gang of AMS-trained killers a good way to stay alive?'

Lloyd was at the far end of the bridge, by an opening in the cavernous walls. 'No. But we don't know if they are still alive. If we go back empty-handed, I doubt the Prison Service will waste any more time or money on us.'

Grierson frowned. 'But no one knows we're down here.'

Connor was trying to get a response from her scanner, but the density of the room seemed to have briefly cut its connection with their skimmer. 'Tolland does. And he'll tell them without hesitation.' She popped the useless scanner into her pocket. 'I still agree with Lloyd. Let's go on.'

Hallett spoke up. 'Anyway, if there are any people alive here, they must be tired and hungry. Maybe we could negotiate with them. Or something.'

Townsend finally stood up. 'Oh Christ, you're wet, Jay. And Charley! I'm disgusted with you. And Lloyd, yeah, I don't know what you're trying to prove but you don't leave me a great deal of choice.'

No one moved for a moment, so Hallett stepped forward, towards Lloyd and the other two. But as she marched past Townsend, she heard the whisper 'Traitor' from the woman, and knew that their particular comradeship was over. Townsend would now consider it to be her versus the four of

them - which would probably make her more dangerous than ever before.

There was a pause - Hallett saw Townsend rummaging around a couple of the bodies, but the smell made her feel ill and she turned away. Whatever she was doing, Hallett did not want to know. It was probably disgusting.

Hallett had shared many conversations with Townsend over the last few weeks. One thing she had worked out a long time ago - something that, despite their far longer acquaintance, even Lloyd seemed to have overlooked regarding Townsend - was that the woman wasn't just bitter or resentful of Lloyd's assumption of leadership. No, Marianne Townsend was a deeply disturbed, almost psychotic person, waiting patiently for the opportunity to kill her nemesis. And Hallett had just placed herself in the same firing line.

Jay Hallett wanted to go back to the *KayBee 2* more than ever before.

Governor Oliver Tolland was sipping on a cup of tea brought in by that dark girl, the Hindi woman. What was her name? Ghoti Rimananee, that was it. Kept herself to herself a lot that one. Good girl. Had a bit of sense really, didn't get involved in Lloyd and Townsend's petty squabbles.

Quite a pretty girl, too, he had to admit. Of course, he'd always had a flair for the exotic and downtrodden, and Rimananee was easily both of those. Bit too into that spiritual mumbo-jumbo stuff, but he could probably break that if he needed to. Find some service rule that forbade her religious convictions.

Back in the past he'd had to contend with any number of primitive religions and frequently crushed them. Just in case they demanded some kind of subservience above and beyond that of the service. Johnny Native had to learn who was the master of the real world, and Colonel Tolland had always had a reputation as a breaker of bad sects and cults.

Still, that was then. In the good old days. Now all he had to do was prevent his prisoners ripping one another's throats

out and ensuring the holds went back full of metals for recycling. Not exactly difficult.

He stabbed at a button on his desk and BABE's Marilyn Monroe face popped into existence before him.

'Now, computer... What is the status of Prison Guard Brutus? I can't have her off duty for too long.'

'Prison Guard Brutus is still incapacitated. Doctor Njobe has been unable to isolate the virus that has struck her down. We... she has been uploading a variety of Grutch databases from medical facilities throughout the system in an attempt to uncover the cause of Brutus's illness. Doctor Njobe will report when progress has been made.'

Tolland steeped his fingers and sat back in his chair. 'How long until Lloyd's party return?'

'I am unable to predict that, I am afraid. No communication has been received for three hours, Governor Tolland. I have attempted alerting the shuttle but the prisoners are possibly not in the vicinity.'

Tolland nodded and sighed. In the far corner of his office, Guppy and Matilda swam about in their tank - Tolland's one piece of calm and serenity in the otherwise constant hurly burly of his life. He sighed again. Longer.

'Governor?'

'Answer me this, computer. What are the chances of propagation? You know, male and female, getting it... well, together, as they say?'

BABE's head almost seemed to tilt fractionally, as if surprised by the question. 'Potentially good, but I would advise caution.'

Tolland clapped his hands. 'Splendid news!'

BABE continued. 'However, it is my duty to point out that such things are illegal and against Prison Service policy.'

Tolland felt deflated. 'Oh. What a shame.' He started shuffling some papers around pointlessly. 'And I was so looking forward to some babies.'

'And the weak cardiac system could be a major problem,' BABE continued.

'Dicky heart, eh? I'd never have guessed.'



BABE pouted slightly, as if bored with the conversation. Which was, of course, impossible for a computer holographic projection. 'Readouts are always available. And recent Calfadorian advances can avert such things - for the right price.' BABE actually sounded to Tolland as if it was fed up with relaying such pointless information to him.

'Typical. Of course, when I was younger, people like myself, good military commanders, received free medicine. Only Johnny Native had to pay.'

'There are other problems, such as the choice of secondary receptacle,' BABE reported as if it had not heard Tolland.

'Secondary re- Oh, I see.' He felt slightly embarrassed. All this new frankness about, well, mating and all that. Blasted computer would be giving graphic descriptions next. Best position and all that. Probably followed up with very colourful diagrams about what goes where. How embarrassing for all concerned.

'Not to mention possible infringements of service regulations plus misuse and damage of service property, abuse of a minor, dereliction of duty -'

It sank in suddenly. 'Computer! Stop!' Tolland looked hard at the disembodied face hovering in front of him. 'What are you talking about, "damage of service property"? They're mine!'

BABE shook its head. 'Not so, Governor Tolland. Under Section eighty-four, Administration Prison Service Management Constitution, dated 2553, governors of prison ships may not claim any legal possession rights to ship, crew or contents.'

Tolland wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. Instead he did what he always did best in cases like this. He shouted. 'You stupid ruddy machine! I'm not thinking about those wretched women! I wanted to know if I could get Guppy and Matilda - my fish - to breed.'

It was of some satisfaction to Tolland that BABE seemed flustered, just for a split second, as it ingested this new information and altered its conception of what their conversation had actually been about.

'Understood. However,' it continued, barely missing a beat, 'breeding of tropical fish is impossible.'

'Why now?'

'Guppy and Matilda are both females of their respective breeds.'

BABE's image vanished, leaving Tolland gazing mournfully at his fish tank. 'Oh, no. Poor Guppy and Matilda. Stuck together in there and no fun.' He then looked back at where BABE's image had been, a tiny smile on his lips.

Blasted computer telling him what kind of life he could and could not live. All his professional life he had been told what was right, what was wrong, what was good, what was bad. All decided and relayed and delivered and stored by bloody computers.

Whatever happened to good old-fashioned manpower? What went wrong? When did humanity become enslaved by the microfibre-optic cable, the voice interface and the hologram?

'Besides which, computer, out here, where no one is likely to know better, if I decide one of those women, or indeed all of them, are *my* property, then *my* property they will become.'

He sat down again, and punched up an image from his holographic records. Rotating on a tiny virtual dais in front of him, her crimes and personal records also hovering beside her, was the tiny image of Ghoti Rimananee. 'A new little Missy for me, eh, Guppy? It's my command, my ship. My responsibility.'

For the first time in some months now, Oliver Tolland smiled with genuine satisfaction. It was time to exert his authority.

'We're being watched. I can feel it.' Emile shivered.

'The only people watching us, Meel, are those very dead and decayed corpses back on the bridge.' Jason had a small torch and was trying to pick his way through one of the big rooms.

They had been walking quite some way now, having given up any hope of actually trailing the women prisoners. Either

they had discovered some alternative route or fallen off one of the many bridges. The orange light that lit the rooms was quite good but Jason was not prepared to trust every footstep to it and opted instead for his halogen torch to provide extra illumination.

As far as Emile was concerned, all it did was provide even larger shadows for things to hide in and more out-of-the-corner-of-his-eye distractions.

‘At times like this I wish I had a blaster like yours at my side,’ he murmured.

Jason coughed and took the blaster out of his holster. ‘Er... like this you mean?’

‘Uh-huh.’

Jason suddenly aimed at Emile, who squealed in shock and dropped on to the floor, covering his head. What was happening? Why was Jason trying to kill him? He hadn’t complained enough for that, surely.

After a few seconds, Emile realized that he was still alive and feeling very silly. He raised his head and unfurled his arms, staring directly at Jason’s blaster, business end still aimed at his head.

‘Jase?’

Jason squeezed the trigger and again, nothing happened. ‘I forgot to recharge it after leaving Dellah.’

Emile opened his mouth to speak rationally but all he heard were a few dozen swearwords and suggestions about Jason’s heritage having more to do with impossible cross-breeding between porcines and bovines. Once that barrage stopped, Emile felt his system had been slightly expunged and he got up, eyeing Jason carefully.

To add insult to injury, Jason was suppressing, rather unsuccessfully, a laugh. ‘Your face...’ he managed to get out.

Emile tried to maintain some dignity and was about to say that he had been worried in case Jason shot the walls and the ceiling fell on their heads, but by the time he’d worked that one out, the moment had passed.

‘I’m sorry, ‘Meel,’ said Jason, offering his hand. ‘I couldn’t resist.’

Emile didn't even try to smile. He just walked towards the far exit, undoubtedly leading towards another bridge over a bottomless ravine. 'Coming, Mr Kane?'

Emile heard Jason sigh behind him. 'I said I'm sorry.'

Emile had had enough. He turned back to Jason. 'Listen! OK, so maybe I all but forced my way into coming with you to this planet. But you, not that long ago, said we were partners. OK, so you've years' more experience than I have, years of life and everything this galaxy has to offer. But that doesn't automatically make me some thick moron you can take the piss out of when it suits you. If I'd wanted to be treated like an idiot I could have stayed with my dad. I'm sorry I'm not all big and mature and sophisticated enough to go round, getting married, shooting people, getting divorced, shafting anyone who comes along, piloting stolen space shuttles and the rest of it. But I'm still me, I'm still Emile Mars-Smith and I still might surprise you by having something to contribute to our lives here. I'd quite like to be treated as a human being if you can't crawl over your ego enough to treat me as an equal.' Emile took a breath. 'I really admired you six months ago, Jason. I thought you were a cool guy with his head screwed on. Right now, I see someone with an underdeveloped sense of humour that the average six-year-old on my home station would have grown out of years ago. Well, you had your fun at my expense, you scared me crapless and now you expect me to just laugh at it. In ten years, Jason, I might. Right now, I just want to find whatever is causing your little green ball to glow and get back to Dellah where I can congratulate the professor on getting rid of a moron like you.'

Emile walked on to the bridge, trembling. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt angry enough to speak that many words at once. Hell, he didn't know if he'd *ever* spoken that many words at once.

Across the other side of the bridge was yet another boring entrance to another probably boring chamber. What the hell was the point?

A hand he knew was Jason's fell on to his shoulder. Jason's voice held no trace of humour, no trace of anger or even hurt. Just... Jasonness.

'C'mon, partner. We've got a homing signal to track down.'

Emile watched as Jason walked on ahead, and felt his heart rate decrease a bit, slowly getting back to its normal steady thump. After a few more seconds, he shook his head and followed his 'partner' into the chamber.

'Bloody hell,' Jason said as they went in. Unlike all the previous rooms, this was some kind of balcony, overlooking the grounds of a vast underground building. Directly ahead of them was the entrance, a flight of blue stone steps leading up to the huge double doors. Like everything they had encountered, the building appeared to have been carved out of the rock and they couldn't quite see how far back it stretched. To their left were what might once have been superbly ornate gardens, with pathways, fountains and even in the distance a maze. All carved from the rock. No real grass or shrubbery was present - it had either withered away or had never even been there - but the areas were clearly mapped out where grass ought to have been. The whole scene was lit by a pale, rather attractive blue light, a vast change from the burnt orange of the previous areas. They looked up - the ceiling of this underground area was impossible to see: the blue haze gave way to a dark nothingness.

'D'you know what Benny would say if she were here, 'Meel?'

Emile shrugged. 'Something archaeological, no doubt.'

'Nope. She'd say something like "Shaft me sideways with a pitchfork, it's Emmanuel." Or something like that.'

'What's an Emmanuel?'

Jason stared at the building. 'Not "an" anything. Emmanuel College is one of the last remaining parts of Cambridge University left on Earth. A magnificent piece of architecture. Well, Benny would think so.'

'And it's been transported here?'

'Hmmm? Oh, no. No, it's been re-created. I'm sure of it. I wonder why.' Jason looked towards the maze. 'Yeah, that's

right. The old River Cam used to run along there until they turned it into a monorail track.'

'I've never heard of it.' Emile looked over the balcony. 'Are we going down there then?'

Jason nodded his agreement. He climbed on to the edge of the balcony and jumped the ten feet or so to the stone floor. Emile looked down at him.

'Well, what are you waiting for?'

Emile was not good with heights. Hell, he was scared to death of heights. It was only ten feet - just under twice his own size.

He jumped and Jason half caught him, softening the thump as he landed on the floor.

'Thanks,' Emile muttered, but Jason was already on his way to the doors.

'They've been opened recently,' he said, pointing at tracks in the dust.

'The women?'

'Probably. We'd better go slowly.'

They squeezed in through the doors and found themselves in a vast open courtyard. 'I don't think we're in Cambridge any more, Toto.' Jason walked forward.

Emile was gazing in astonishment. 'Matryoshka,' he said quietly. It reminded him of something his mother had always positioned beside her mirror. Something that his father had disposed of after her death without asking Emile if *he* wanted it, as some kind of reminder. Of course, men didn't need reminders of dead mothers on the relay station. That wasn't the way of the Natural Path - material things were wrong. Somehow, his father had made Emile believe that everything about his mother had, therefore, been wrong. That she had somehow been at odds with life, the universe and everything in it. Her way was not the Natural Path.

It had been a few years before Emile had begun to question his father's motivation, to question if his father had disposed of Mother's things out of embarrassment. Or hurt. He still hadn't had an answer. He pictured in his mind's eye the doll beside the mirror. A tiny, wooden, sculptured object that

unscrewed in the middle to reveal another one inside. And inside that another, then another until there was one tiny doll at the centre. As a young boy Emile had always tried to unscrew that last one, convinced there must be another inside it. The dolls were magic, so why did the magic end there? But the doll refused to be unscrewed and in anger at this, young Emile had smashed it open, determined to release the other dolls trapped inside. All he had found was air.

He had burst into tears at that point - this was his mother's most treasured (or rather only) possession. And he had smashed it - the shame and the guilt had been too much. However, his mother had just laughed and picked him up, smothering him in her grey robes, smelling of sweet lavender, and wiping the tears away from his eyes. He had stammered out an apology but she had kissed him and held him tighter. 'Dolls can be replaced,' she had said. 'But Emiles are unique and your curiosity and compassion will take you far.'

He remembered his last words to her, by then beyond hearing or understanding as the cancer destroyed her. 'Don't go, Mother. You are unique and can't be replaced.' And he remembered his father leading him away, almost dragging him as he tried to take a last look at her face, to burn that image on his mind and make sure it never went away.

But his father had moved him too quickly, and Emile's overriding last memory of his mother was her liver-spotted hands, frail and twisted, twitching slightly in her unhappy sleep.

He couldn't picture her face except from the perspective of an eight-year-old holding a broken doll and smelling lavender.

But seeing this magnificent building, with identical college after college fading into the distance, lined up next to each other, and guessing that behind each set of doors were another group of colleges and courtyards, each with another group of colleges beyond... Emile felt a wholly unexpected

tear crawl down his left cheek and, with an involuntary sniff, he wiped it away.

He mustn't let Jason see him sad. It wasn't right. It wasn't what they did in the Natural Path.

Oh, damn the Natural Path and their quasi-religious, backward, fundamentalist rubbish.

When the next couple of tears trickled out of his eyes, he let them run their course. And when he felt Jason's arm across his shoulders, he just mumbled a thank-you.

'It's beautiful.' He sniffed.

'And?'

'And... and it makes me want to say goodbye to someone I didn't know I hadn't said goodbye to properly.'

He knew Jason was uneasy, that Jason wasn't great at displaying his emotions. So when Jason removed his arm and then just squeezed Emile's hand for a fraction of a second before walking into the courtyard, Emile found he could smile again.

'I want to visit her grave, Jason. One day.'

'Your mum?' asked Jason without looking around.

'Uh-huh. She's buried with lots of the Natural Path people on a small moon. She hated being part of the Natural Path. It wasn't her way, it was my father's. She'd have hated being buried there.'

Jason nodded. 'One day maybe you can do something about it.'

'One day.' Emile suddenly started pointing. 'Eenie meenie minee mo.' He was pointing at the furthest-left exit from the courtyard. 'Shall we go that way?'

Jason was kneeling by the various exits, quickly moving from one to another. He pointed to the two furthest-right ones. 'The women split up, took two different options. The dust is disturbed.' He looked at the way Emile had, rather arbitrarily, chosen. 'Your way sounds good to me. Let's go.'

They passed through into another tiny courtyard before mounting a flight of blue rock steps, identical to the main ones outside, and passed through an identical set of double doors. Sure enough, they were in another courtyard,



although only leading to two edifices. Emile immediately adapted his preconceptions - instead of expanding, the volume of buildings behind each doorway halved. Jason presumably thought the same.

‘Probably only one more.’ They went through and sure enough, there was just one further building, which they entered.

No courtyard this time, Emile noted instantly. Instead, a long covered walkway, a blue rock wall to the right, but to the left a balcony over a long drop to what appeared to be city streets and houses below.

‘There’s no noticeable pressure drops,’ Jason was saying. ‘Yet we’ve dropped a dozen feet or so each time. And those streets below us are a good thirty feet further down.’

‘No life, Jase. There’s nothing. It’s like a full-scale model. Everything is carved from the rock.’ Emile was fascinated. ‘It’s really beautiful. Nothing’s been built - it’s all carved. This must have been a large lump of rock someone’s spent years chiselling into.’

‘I wonder if anyone actually lived here, or whether it was just a hobby. Someone who got a kick out of sweating their life away making life-size toytowns.’ Jason peered into the distance. ‘It’s difficult to tell whether or not it just fades into the horizon or whether some false perspective’s been created.’

Emile suddenly felt a chill run down his back. That feeling of being watched had returned.

Jason turned to look at him, presumably aware that, unusually, Emile hadn’t spoken for a few moments.

‘What’s up?’

Emile explained his feelings again, so Jason suggested they carry on walking.

They reached the end of the balcony area and faced a single door. With a shrug, Jason yanked it open.

‘Holy crap, Batman.’ Jason shook his head. ‘I don’t believe it.’

They were on the end of a massive blue stone suspension bridge, the supports of which seemed to be carved out of the same stone. The bridge led to a central flat disc, from which

three other bridges led, ultimately, Emile guessed, back through the variety of identical buildings and courtyards.

‘No matter which route we took, we’d have ended up here.’ Emile looked over the side of the bridge, where more of the city below was spread out.

Jason quickly jogged to the central disc, and Emile plodded after him.

‘I wish Benny were here,’ Jason said. ‘I mean, she’d be having an orgasm over all this.’

Emile tried not to think too hard about that and instead occupied himself by tracing with his fingers some carvings in the floor, dead centre of the disc. ‘I don’t think any of the women are here yet, Jason. This dust hasn’t been disturbed like before.’

‘Which gives us an advantage.’

‘Unless they found something more interesting,’ Emile offered.

Jason didn’t seem to care. He produced his little green glowing ball. It was pulsating wildly now. ‘He’s close. Really close.’ Jason dropped to his knees beside Emile, blowing the rest of the dust off the etchings on the ground. There were four grooves, about eight inches long, forming a square. In the middle of those, two indentations. Jason eased his finger into one, then the other. ‘Play safe, or take risks, ‘Meel?’

Emile smiled. Jason was including him in the decisions at last. ‘Risks,’ he said, knowing it was what Jason wanted to hear, but also, he was pleased to note, because he actually wanted to take them anyway.

Jason pressed into the left-hand indentation and, for a second, nothing happened.

Then they felt a slight vibration in the disc and a loud *ka-chunk* noise. Emile twisted around, eyes widening in surprise. ‘Er, Jase... the bridges

The four bridges were moving back from the central disc they were crouched on.

‘Well, I hope this thing is supported independently,’ Jason said.

It was, and the indentations marked as a square suddenly shuddered and a square of blue rock came up.

Except that it didn't, Emile realized. They were going down - the blue rock square, which was now a rectangle, was the central pillar supporting the disc and they were slowly dropping.

'It's a lift. Or a platform.' Jason stood up, using the central pillar for support, letting his fingers play down the side as it appeared to grow past them. 'We're going into the city.'

Emile looked up. He could now see the underside of the bridges, and the ground below was much closer. About fifteen feet away.

A few moments later, the lift ground to a halt and they jumped the last couple of feet to the rocky floor.

Emile breathed deeply. No change in the air. Slightly stale but no noticeable drop in pressure. 'Whoever built all this,' he said to Jason, 'prepared it well.'

Jason grunted his agreement and pointed to the right. There was a pathway, indicated by little stones lining it. 'That seems to be the preferred option.'

Emile just assumed that Jason, being Jason, would therefore take the opposite direction, but he didn't. He followed the path.

Emile didn't really mind and so he too took the path, which led them past tiny carved huts and a couple of larger dwellings - shops or even guesthouses perhaps.

'A pub would be nice,' Jason called out. 'Or a tourist information bureau.'

They soon found themselves by yet another doorway. Emile sighed. 'This place is starting to give me the creeps, Jase. I mean, surely someone must have lived here. Even a skeleton would be nice, just to confirm that this isn't some huge illusion.'

Jason shoved open the doorway. They were in a largish chamber, each of the four walls lined with computer banks, machinery, controls and suchlike. At the centre was a glass-covered coffin, but empty.

However, lying next to this on the floor was the body of one of the most stunning men Emile had ever seen. Emile had never really fancied the ‘typical’ male, that kind of well-muscled, deeply tanned, neatly sculpted, blond-haired, blue-eyed hunk so favoured by holovids and health-and-fitness magazines. He usually liked his guys to be a bit off-kilter, a bit unusual.

Yet this man looked as if he had walked straight out of an advert for designer clothes or aftershave lotions.

He was dressed in a loose white judogui, baggy leggings and sandals (with socks, though - oh, bad move). A series of brown leather straps wove around the leggings and waist with a couple of jewel-encrusted bags hung there. The judogui was tightened by a thin black leather thong tied around the waist.

If Emile’s jaw had momentarily hit the floor on seeing the body, it went through into whatever basement the room might have had when Jason crouched beside the body, nodding. ‘Christopher bloody Cwej, explorer, adventurer, one-time Adjudicator and chum of one Bernice Summerfield.’

‘Adjudicator? Like in “policeman”?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘And you... you knew him? As a friend?’

‘I still do, hopefully.’ Then Jason obviously twigged what Emile meant. ‘Very funny. I don’t spend all my life on the other side of the law, you know.’ He bent down towards Chris. ‘Good, he’s not dead. His breathing is shallow but he’s quite alive. Just comatose.’ Jason scrabbled around on the floor until he found what he was looking for in a corner.

He triumphantly displayed a green sphere identical to his own. Neither was pulsating.

‘Did you know he was going to be here?’ Emile asked.

‘I thought he might be. And once my homing device started yelping

‘Bit of a coincidence, Jason. I mean, you nick Benny’s info on Ardethe and, lo and behold, this friend of yours is here. Was Benny expecting him?’

‘Yes. It’s bizarre. And no, I don’t imagine so.’ Jason sat the unconscious man up against the coffin thing. ‘Firstly, I’m fairly certain this isn’t Ardethe. From what I can gather from the news broadcasts and some... other sources I have, this planet recently just appeared in this sector, which probably confused the archaeologists. They thought it was Ardethe because they were supposed to. Someone wanted them to uncover what was down here. My sources believe whatever this place is, it’s of a great deal of importance to someone.’

Emile tried to take this in. ‘And this guy?’

‘No idea what his connection is. We... lost touch when Benny and I separated. Neither she nor I have seen him since, oh, about the start of... well, a very long time ago. On Earth’s moon. I think we should get him back to the surface. Try to get back to Dellah and see what Benny has to say.’

‘Oh, you do, do you?’

Emile’s blood froze, or so he thought. That was a new voice. Behind him. Female.

He turned around to see two of the green-clad women standing by the doorway, both carrying large bits of blue rock. Emile imagined the impact of one against his head and immediately surrendered.

‘We surrender,’ he said meekly.

‘We do?’ Jason was beside him in an instant. ‘Well, that’s democracy for you.’ He smiled at the women. ‘Apparently we surrender.’

\* \* \*

Jay Hallett was very bored now. She had stood on this balcony, overlooking the stupid deserted city for ages. Townsend had gone walkies and where Lloyd and Connor were was anyone’s guess.

And she was stuffed - babysitting Grierson, Lloyd’s little protégé because the Top Dog didn’t want to expose her to any danger until she and Connor had finished their explorations. And of course, there had been the warning about making sure Grierson was with Hallett and not left alone with Townsend - said in a tone that Hallett knew wasn’t worth arguing with.

‘It’s really beautiful, Jay,’ Grierson said as she stared at the city. ‘Bit like home.’

Hallett glanced back at the doorway wishing Townsend would return from whatever recce she was on. They had passed through interminable identical buildings until finding this walkway. Townsend had gone through the door at the end and not returned. Hallett originally decided to follow, but self-preservation had taken over. Perhaps something on the other side had killed Townsend and she had no real desire to go the same way.

She smiled suddenly. ‘Jeni, do you want to nip through the door and see where Marianne’s got to?’

‘Sure.’ Grierson walked off.

Hallett watched her go... Lloyd was going to kill her if anything went wrong. Then again, maybe she and Charley Connor were dead already. Whoever killed those AMS troopers and archaeologists might be searching for her now.

The door shut with a loud bang and Hallett jumped. Grierson was gone.

Oh bugger this!

Hallett decided to take the risk and follow her – somehow an angry Lloyd mourning the death of Grierson was more frightening than whatever might be beyond the door.

Then she saw something out of the corner of her eye. A tiny black speck on the horizon, getting larger.

Something was flying across the city. A bird of some sort.

Goddess, something was actually alive down here!

Jeni Grierson stood on the edge of a cut-off bridge. Another three bridges were opposite her, and a tall column in the centre of the space, but whatever connected all four was gone. She looked over the edge and could see a round platform that clearly came up - the long stone column in the middle was the spindle. Of Townsend she saw no sign.

‘Marianne?’ she called below, but nothing moved.

Except in the corner of her eye. She looked to the right, in the same direction she had looked across the city back through the doorway, where Jay was waiting for her.

It was a tiny black blob, moving across the sky.  
No. Two black blobs, flying in their direction.

Marianne Townsend was weaving throughout the city streets. She had gone on the platform - it operated like a traditional elevator. There had been a button to call it hidden on the side of the suspension bridge and she'd taken the platform into the city. A path was clearly designated as one to follow, so she'd instinctively taken a wholly different route.

She looked up, and in the distance could see the balcony with Hallett on. No point in calling to her, she probably wouldn't hear from that distance.

She carried on walking through the silly streets of this silly stone town, wondering what had happened to the silly people who'd built it.

Then something caught her eye - two black blobs on the skyline. Some things were flying towards her.

She hoped they were hostile - she could do with something to focus her mind on. Maybe she could point them in Lloyd's direction. Or better still, Grierson's. Get that stupid child out of the way, which would devastate Lloyd. Seeing her miserable was far better than seeing her dead.

Suddenly she realized the two black blobs were much closer. They flew right over her but she still couldn't quite discern a shape for them. It was as if they weren't quite... well, quite real. Quite solid enough to see properly.

She tried to see where they had gone and looked back at the balcony area, but it was half blotted out by the buildings around her.

She couldn't see Hallett or Grierson.

But she heard someone scream.

And then stop.

## THROW HER AWAY (AND GET A NEW ONE)

*'Hi, this is DNN, bringing you all the Dellah news from the planet and beyond. I'm Jake Garrett.*

*'The academic world is reeling after the terrible accident that occurred at the Conference on Scientific Reform, which recently began on Ashleigh's World. Among those who are known to have died in the inexplicable fire in L'Hotel Magnifique are Professor Ernst Proot, the System's foremost expert on auditory affairs, Professor Kathisul, chief librarian and a leading expert on the galactic 'net and Professor Pul Zooss, astronomer and geologist. Professor Zooss was a guest on this very programme just hours before his tragic death. It is thought that at least twelve other human scholars and doctors have perished in this unusual accident, considered by many to be a tragedy for civilization. Tributes and full details will be broadcast as more details become known. There are reports that some nonhuman academics died as well.*

*"This has been a tragedy of biblical proportions. It will be many years before we can cease grieving over this frightful loss."*

*'That was Admin-Proctor Lucinda Vrana aboard the AMS Horatio on her way back to Central just after lunchtime today.*

*'On a lighter note - other news just in: the hot war of Spindraft Maxima came to a halt yesterday when nuclear charges purchased by both sides proved to have mistakenly replaced with bulk orders of writing instruments. We say that it's a clear case of the pen being mightier than the ICBM.*

*'This has been DNN, bringing you all the Dellah news from the planet and beyond. I'm Jake Garrett.'*



'What was that?' Emile looked towards the closed door behind the two women.

'What was what?' asked the one with short blonde hair.

'I didn't hear anything,' said the other one, the older one with long dark hair.

'I thought I heard a shout. Or a scream.'

The older woman sneered at him. 'Yeah. Right.'

Jason eased in front of Emile.

'Please excuse my young friend,' he said, tapping the side of his head. 'He's a bit young, and excitable. Actually, a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic, if you get my drift. Exploring this place is all a bit of an adventure for him. The orphanage brought him up on a diet of Comrade 7 versus Demona comic books. He has a hard time separating reality from fiction as a result. I'm so sorry.' He offered his hand. 'My name is Kane. Jason Kane. This is Emile Mars-Smith, my er... charge for the week. We got a bit lost.'

'Sure you did,' said the older woman. 'Like four or five miles underground lost.'

'We've been down here for days. You're the first people we've seen. D'you know how to get out?'

Emile thought it was time to join in now - although the 'two sandwiches short' bit would not be forgotten in a hurry. 'Mr Kane, are these nice people taking us back home?' He turned and beamed at the women. 'I believe in the Natural Path.'

Both women took a step back - as if it was a plague rather than a religion. Still, it could be an advantage. 'Do you believe?' he asked. 'Mr Kane and I do.'

Pressure on his right foot should have told him to stop, but he pressed on. Jason wasn't going to have all the fun. 'Mr Kane is my best friend. He looks after me really nicely. We play games and -' He stopped as the pressure on his foot got painfully larger.

'He does go on,' Jason started to say, but the blonde woman pushed forward and grabbed Jason by the collar, lifting him off the ground fractionally. Emile could see some very overdeveloped biceps in operation.

‘Listen you fish-eyed pederast, why are you down here really? Just to abuse the boy or what?’

Oh. Now Emile could see what Jason had stepped on his foot for. He hadn’t thought that through very well.

‘Actually...’ Emile pushed between Jason and the blonde, causing her to relinquish her hold. ‘Actually, we’re here to rescue Jason’s old friend Chris. He’s lying there. He’s from a very long way away and is probably tired.’ He leant forward conspiratorially. ‘He’s a policeman.’

Jason groaned quietly, but the two women looked at each other.

‘Make that three sandwiches,’ the older one muttered.

‘Now Jason!’ screeched Emile, diving forward and wrenching the rock out of the blonde’s hand.

Jason headbutted her in the stomach, and she crumpled against the wall, all the breath knocked out of her body as they both thudded into the door.

The older woman brought her rock up to smash on to Jason but Emile grabbed her arm and, although it didn’t really unbalance her, the rock dropped. Scooping that up, Emile grinned.

‘OK, ladies, I’ve got the weapons now. What’s it to be? Civilized chat or head-mashing?’

Jason was sitting on top of the blonde, who was struggling violently, but he kept his balance.

‘All right, boy,’ said the older woman. ‘You win.’ She glanced at her friend. ‘Mr Kane, if you’d kindly get off Charley, maybe we can talk this through.’

Jason looked at her. ‘To coin a phrase, “Yeah, right”. Who are you two?’

‘I’m Charlene Connor,’ grunted the blonde he was holding down. ‘Life for supplying and taking sargol. Among other things. That’s my boss, Siobhan Lloyd.’

‘You a lifer too?’

‘It’s political. With and without a capital P.’ Lloyd shrugged. ‘And you two?’

Emile eyed Lloyd warily. ‘As he said, he’s Jason and I’m Emile.’

‘But not really dim abused and vile abuser?’

Emile shook his head, adding for dramatic value, ‘But the Chris-is-our-friend bit was true.’

Lloyd grinned. ‘And why are you down here? Same as us?’

‘Scavenging for the PS? Nah.’ Jason slowly backed away from Connor, who pushed herself up. ‘Emile was telling the truth to some extent. Chris over there is a friend of mine. We just found him here. I’ve no idea how he got here, though. This place doesn’t look like it’s been disturbed for years prior to today.’

‘Except the dead bodies. Did you kill them?’

‘Hardly. They’ve been dead a good week at least.’

The door swung open suddenly and a younger woman came in, calling for Lloyd.

‘The whole city is all in one piece and working - there’s a lift and everything. The builders must have set all this up before they - oh.’ She stopped at seeing the three males. ‘Who are you?’

‘Hello,’ said Emile. The newcomer was a short girl, her hair cut into a skull-hugging crop. She was quite pretty, in a rough sort of way. Not like those back on Dellah, more like someone from his home, back on the relay station. He guessed that she was about his age. ‘My name’s Emile. This is Jason and Chris Cwej.’

The newcomer immediately stood behind and slightly to one side of Lloyd. ‘Where’d they come from, Siobhan?’

‘I’m not sure, Jeni. We were just trying to find out, weren’t we, Charley?’

Connor meanwhile was letting herself be distracted by the room, and in particular the casket Chris had presumably been in.

‘It must be a laboratory of sorts. Just what were they doing? All these computers and things. They’re everywhere.’

Jason pointed at the top end of the casket. ‘Whatever this was designed for, it was clearly meant for a human. See, these bits would attach themselves to a skull.’

‘Chris?’ Emile suggested.

Jason looked down at the prone body. 'How did he get out, though?'

Lloyd coughed. 'Look, I'm sure this is very interesting, but we are here to get a job done and -'

'Lloyd,' interrupted Connor, 'listen. Whatever this place is, the service don't know about it, right? Imagine the reward we'll get if we tell 'em about this. This technology is working. I mean, these computers aren't running now, but by the look of it, they should be, right?' She got her scanner out and held it up to the computers. It worked intermittently. 'Look, there's not a trace of metal in here. Nor plastic. This is pure glass and rock. This is a whole new technology waiting to be plundered. If we play this right, Tolland will come out of this looking like a hero and we'll get more than parole. We could be asking for freedom, clearance, the works. For the sake of an extra hour, let's stay and see what we can learn, eh?'

Lloyd shrugged. 'OK, Charley, but it's your shout. Anything goes wrong, it's your head, not mine, all right?'

Connor nodded and she and Jason began prodding the casket.

'Your friend Jason. Bit of a scientist is he?' Lloyd asked.

Emile shook his head. 'I don't think so. Shouldn't think he understands any of it.'

'Why's he so engrossed with Charley then?' Lloyd frowned.

'Probably because he likes the company of intelligent and pretty ladies.' Emile stood in front of Lloyd. 'So, why are *you* here?'

Lloyd began to explain their mission, the possibility of parole and where they had come from, when another woman rushed in.

Emile frowned. 'Are there any more of you?'

'Lloyd, have you seen Townsend?' said the newcomer, breathless, her accent slightly different from the others. 'I've looked everywhere for her.' Then she took in the scene around her. 'Hell's bells. What's going -'

'Yeah, right, Jay. Thanks. I'm bored of explaining this one.' Lloyd pointed at Chris. 'Can he be carried?'

Before Emile could reply, yet another woman, with straight black hair, walked in, unfazed by anything, unlike the others.

‘Party time I see! Keeping this to yourselves, then?’

The younger woman, Jeni, spoke up. ‘We were about to look for you, Marianne.’

‘Of course you were, Grierson.’ She looked around. ‘So, this is where the builders of this place keep their harem is it? Three strapping young men. Just what I’ve always wanted.’ She smiled unkindly at Grierson. ‘One about the right age for you as well, little girlie.’

‘A little more than a harem, Townsend,’ muttered Connor from the casket, without actually looking at her. ‘I wonder what this is all for. This coffin thing seems to be some kind of transmitter, going by this stuff.’

Jason nodded. ‘Not your average radio, though.’

Connor agreed. ‘I think it’s a matter transporter of some sort.’

Townsend gaped. ‘You’re joking. This far from a relay station? It can’t actually work at this range.’

‘Well, whoever built this place thought it could,’ Connor snapped. ‘It certainly explains how chummy here arrived.’

‘Or just maybe,’ Lloyd said quietly, ‘these two brought him with them, and this is some sort of elaborate trap.’

‘He’s a bit bloody heavy to bring all the way from the surface,’ Emile said. ‘Who d’you think I am, Power Guy? And Jason is my sidekick, Mouth-Man?’ Emile just knew, without actually looking, that he got a frosty glare for that from Jason.

‘Trap. It’s a trap. Yes...’

They all stared in quiet amazement at Chris Cwej, whose eyes were flickering. Jason was at his side in a second. ‘Chris? Chris, are you OK? It’s me, Jason Kane.’

He glanced over at Lloyd. ‘Have you got any water?’

Lloyd started to shake her head, but Emile was surprised to see the woman called Townsend kneel down, producing a water bottle from her beltpack.

Emile also noted that this elicited looks that seemed to be of pure shock from all four other women.

Jason gratefully took the bottle and tipped some water into Chris's mouth. The young blond man coughed and spluttered, but his eyes popped wide open.

'Chris?'

Chris looked from left to right, taking it all in, apparently. He tried to move back a bit, but the stone base of the casket prevented this.

'Who... ?' He coughed again, clearing his throat. His voice got fractionally stronger. 'Who are you?'

Emile thought it was a nice voice, well cultured and deep. Sexy.

'It's me. Jason Kane, Benny's hus- ex-husband. That's my new partner-in-crime, Emile. And these women are -' he looked across at Lloyd, then back at Chris, '- other friends.'

Chris just stared at him. 'Jason... Jason Kane?'

Jason nodded. 'Yup. Come to find you. Followed your homing device.' Jason held up the two green spheres, and Chris shakily reached up and took his back, pocketing it.

'I... I don't know you, though.'

Jason looked stunned. 'C'mon. You came to my wedding. You had a partner, Roz?'

Chris shook his head. 'I can't remember,' he said softly. 'I can't remember.'

Jason looked across at Lloyd again, but she shrugged.

'Ask him why he said this was a trap.'

Jason was about to do so, when Chris grabbed his tunic. 'You called me Chris. Who is Chris? Who am I? I don't remember. Who am I?'

He slumped back, and seemed to drop into another deep sleep.

'Great. One amnesiac who probably could tell us all we need to know.' Jason thumped the side of the casket. 'Damn, damn, damn.'

Connor was beside Lloyd. 'Siobhan, there's something wrong here you know.'

'Too right. These three are at the centre of it.'

'No, I rather think we all are.'

Townsend was gazing at them. 'Explain.'

Connor held up her scanner. 'There's no metal here at all, not a single trace element. I can't think of anywhere that doesn't have some kind of ore, even in the most basic rock. But this place has nothing. Well, not here anyway.'

'But there was metal right back by the tunnel entrance,' put in Hallett. 'And the bridges.'

Connor nodded. 'Oh yeah, so there was. Why?'

Hallett shrugged. 'How the hell should I know?'

'Why are we here?'

Lloyd answered that one. 'To find metals and report back.'

'Which we should have done hours ago,' added Townsend glumly.

'There's something not right, guys,' Connor insisted. 'A few strips of metal. Carrots. Enough to make us come down here. And find this. Find them even.' She pointed at Emile, Jason and Chris. 'But there isn't any. I think the little that we've seen was put there for us. Or for someone to find. To entice us further. Metal is metal and these days it's always a commodity.'

'Why make us go scrabbling underneath the legendary Ardethe? And who did all this, Charley? You're not being very scientific.'

'Oh, this isn't Ardethe,' put in Jason. 'I'm fairly certain of that. No moons. Ardethe should have two or three.'

Emile let this sink in. 'But you said... I mean Benny's coordinates

Jason bounced his green sphere in his hand. 'Maybe she got them wrong. I'm pretty sure Ardethe is near here, but not actually here. I think we've all fallen into the same trap as those AMS folk and their dig.'

'Trap...' Grierson walked over to Chris. 'This poor man said this was a trap.' She looked back at the others. 'Siobhan, why would someone set a trap for us?'

'Yeah,' said Townsend. 'And who?'

Lloyd waved them all away. 'Hey, look, this is just Charley's overactive imagination. Let's get back to Tolland, tell him everything. Then it's his shout. As Charley said, if he wants the credit for finding this "lost civilization" or whatever this

is, Ardethe or otherwise, that's up to him. But if we're to get parole, we have to keep him up to speed.'

'Pragmatic as ever, Lloyd,' said Hallett.

'Big word for you, Jay,' said Townsend. 'Be careful.'

Connor was not giving up. 'Look, back out there, some people died. Maybe these guys did it, maybe not. But just think for a sec. We're a handful of inexperienced humans. We don't know what has gone on here, but someone a damn sight cleverer than us has built an entire city out of stone, including computers, matter transmitter, bridges, lifts

'Of course, it's all hypothetical -' interrupted Lloyd.

Connor nodded. 'Oh, I hope for our sakes it is. Because if I am right, there's somebody, somewhere out there, probably watching us and having a damn good laugh at our gullibility. Because we fell into their trap.'

'Unless they wanted our flitter, to get to the *KayBee 2* and escape. To get away from here,' Grierson said. 'Well, it's a possibility.'

'Then they're probably already there! Tolland and the others are probably long dead and the *KayBee 2*'s long gone,' Townsend stared hard at Lloyd. 'And it's all your bloody fault!'

'Oh, thanks! That helps a great deal.' Lloyd looked at Jason. 'What's your opinion, mystery man?'

Townsend laughed. 'You what? We don't know who he is - what any of them are. But you're willing to discuss this with them before they've explained why they're here or anything. Next you'll want to take them on board our flitter - which probably isn't there anyway. Great, Lloyd.'

'Well, you've changed your tune suddenly,' Emile spoke up. 'You were happy to give Chris water just now.'

Townsend looked momentarily confused. Then she seemed back in control. 'Yeah, well, maybe I'm getting maternalistic in my old age. Doesn't mean I want to take responsibility for you.'

'All right, all right. We'll leave them here. But I think you'll regret it. If nothing else, you must be curious.'



Jason and Emile stood back. 'Your decision, ladies,' said Jason. 'My ship is wrecked, we've no other way of getting off the planet.'

'You're our only hope,' Emile added, hoping he sounded mournful rather than melodramatic.

'OK, OK.' Townsend shook her head in exasperation, Then she rounded on Grierson and Chris. 'But I'm not carrying *him* up to the surface.'

It took nearly an hour, but just as Emile expected, something went wrong as they neared the final exit from the massive college building.

Emile was, to be frank, knackered. He was sure it had taken longer to get back than it had to get to the chamber in which they had found Chris. Then again, maybe they weren't going at such a brisk pace. And Chris was no lightweight. To add to the tension he felt, Townsend and Lloyd had been sniping all the way back - although he had quickly got used to that - while Connor and Jason seemed to be getting on like a house on fire. Emile felt a slight twinge of... what? Jealousy? Pathetic, Emile, really pathetic. Like, he was really likely to be uppermost in Jason's mind right now.

So he took turns to help carry the rather dead weight of Chris Cwej. Grierson wasn't a great deal of help — she could go for about three minutes before the weight got to her. The red-headed girl, Hallett, just carried Chris without complaint, holding him under the armpits, while Emile took his ankles. Emile had never considered a career in physical training but he was grateful that, in the months since he'd first gone to Dellah, he'd had reason to buff himself up a bit. Try to lose some of what Tameka had called 'puppy fat'. And his father had called 'obesity'. Oddly, Tameka's definition was the easier to accept. Funny that.

Emile and Grierson nattered on about anything, really, to pass the time. Her colony, his relay station. She was very interested in the Natural Path, which he found slightly disturbing, and she didn't talk much about whatever got her

sent to prison. However, contrary to popular opinion, Emile *had* learnt the art of tact, so he didn't probe too deeply.

Emile found himself telling her about Tameka, baby Jock and Scott. In fact, he talked a lot about Scott (damn, why hadn't he got the guy out of his system?), but Grierson was far more interested in Tameka.

'I always wanted to have babies,' she said. 'I love babies. I used to look after the children of the sheriff back home. He had lovely ones. A girl, Sami, and two twin boys, Darien and Alexis.' She proceeded to bore Emile with details of the three kids and what they got up to.

'So, you were some sort of childminder?' He tried to think of the archaic term used back home. 'A nanny?'

She nodded. 'I loved all that. But when I went to prison, they wouldn't let me see them any more. And Sheriff Hyckman and his wife never came to visit.' Grierson sighed. 'I miss them all.'

So, there they were, Jason and Connor shoving the door open, whereupon they should have faced the first of the innumerable bridges back to the ladder. Instead Hallett dropped Chris's torso and stumbled, then collapsed. Lloyd was beside her instantly, quickly followed by Connor, her scanner bleeping.

A look Emile couldn't fathom passed between them. 'Is she OK?'

Lloyd nodded. 'Exhausted. We all are, I think. Jay must've been putting up with more than she was letting on.'

Hallett moaned and stirred. Her eyes flickered open and she actually smiled. Just for a brief moment. Then her brow furrowed and she began to sit up. 'What the hell happened? Who hit me?'

'No one,' snapped Townsend, standing just to one side. 'You fainted.'

Hallett tried to laugh - and then realized Townsend was serious. 'Get outta here, Mari. I don't faint.'

'You don't normally side with Lloyd, either,' Townsend said quietly. 'Maybe things are changing more than you thought.'

Lloyd and Connor gave each other that strange look again, but Emile was none the wiser.

Grierson was checking on Chris, along with Jason.

‘Look, I’ll give you a break from him,’ he said. ‘It’s my turn anyway.’ He glanced over to Connor. ‘Give us a hand?’

Connor nodded, slipping her scanner back into her backpack.

Lloyd was easing Hallett up, while Townsend stood further away now, her arms wrapped around herself, lips pursed. She was nodding slightly to herself, as if she was arguing with her own thoughts. Emile was about to ask if she was OK, when she grabbed at Lloyd’s arm.

‘Siobhan, listen to me. Something’s wrong. Something down here... it’s all wrong.’

Lloyd pulled away, staring astonished at Townsend. ‘Wha-’

But Townsend was insistent. She grabbed out at Lloyd again, but missed and staggered, dropping to her knees. Hallett tried to get to her, but Townsend thrashed out with her arm, keeping everyone away. ‘Get away from me, you!’ She glared at Hallett. ‘Stay back, all of you. There’s something wrong here. I can feel it!’

‘Is she always like this?’ Emile asked Grierson quietly.

The girl just shook her head. ‘I’ve never heard her refer to Siobhan by her first name before. Marianne is usually so strong.’

By now Townsend was curling up into a ball, hugging her knees, shaking her head. ‘He was right. It’s a trap. A huge bloody trap. And we’ve fallen into it.’ Suddenly she laughed. ‘I don’t believe it, Lloyd. You finally killed me. Killed us all. I hope you’re satisfied!’

Lloyd was on her haunches, just out of Townsend’s reach. ‘Marianne, what is it? Are you sick? Does something hurt?’

‘Maybe she injured herself earlier,’ offered Connor. ‘Bumped her head.’

She left Jason with Chris, pulling the scanner out of her pocket and activating it.

Townsend lashed out again, and the scanner went flying from Connor’s grip, smashing into a wall. It didn’t need

anyone to pick it up to know that it was irreparably damaged, so Connor left it there. Instead, she eased Lloyd away. 'I couldn't get any readings from her in time.' She glanced at the others, then pulled Lloyd away further, to talk privately.

Emile felt a hand squeezing his shoulder. It was Jason.

'Listen partner, when we get to the surface, you and I get Chris back to the *Mother Fist*.'

'But it's not working -'

'Yeah, well, fixing it seems a better option than going off with these wackos.'

'And Chris?'

Jason shrugged. 'He's OK, I think. There are no physical injuries, according to Charley -'

'Oh, "Charley". Right.'

Jason briefly closed his eye in annoyance. 'Don't get clever, Meel. She's got a theory about this place and if she's right, we could be in danger.'

'Is she right?'

'How the hell do I know? But I don't intend hanging around any longer than I need to just to satisfy her curiosity.'

Emile thought about this. 'Wouldn't we be safer on their scavenger ship then?'

'Probably. If we get there. Look at them, Meel. One's a psycho, one's a girl, one's a druggie or some such and the leader's so far out of her depth.'

'And "Charley"?'

'She's OK as far as I can see. Seems cool enough. Still, that's what I thought about Benny, and look where that got me.'

'Got a lot in common, I thought, her and Benny. Fancy your chances?'

'Shut up, Meel. Benny has class. This one's a criminal, probably dangerous stuff, for all the charm.'

'Sounds right up your street, Jase.'

Jason stepped back. 'You know, if you fell off one of those bridges out there, there's bugger all I could do except say sorry to Benny.'

Emile looked at Jason. 'Hey, I was joking,' he protested. But something told him that Jason might not have been. Emile, he thought, good time to lay off the Benny-versus-'Charley' jokes. 'I'm sorry, Jase.'

'Good. When we get a chance, we're out of here, 'kay?'

Emile agreed.

'Governor Tolland?'

Tolland almost jumped out of his skin as the Marilyn Monroe visage blurred into existence before him. 'Yes? What is it now?'

'Urgent message from Prison Service Central.'

Tolland waited for a second, but BABE was not forthcoming. 'Oh, for goodness' sake. Yes, computer. Code alpha omega three.'

'You are cleared for priority message. It says: Scavenger to return to Central as soon as possible. Planet you are orbiting has been designated an off-limits world. Proceed to Central with haste and prepare crew for debriefing. Message ends, Governor Tolland.'

Tolland thought about this. Which was stranger? Referring to the prisoners as his 'crew' and needing a 'debriefing' or the fact that the ruddy computer had relayed the message rather than displaying the hologram of the actual messenger. Most unusual.

As if anticipating this, BABE's face smiled. 'The message came by subspace carrier, Governor, rather than via the net.'

Tolland nodded, half understanding. 'Ah, probably some jumped-up Johnny Native who can't read English unless it's put literally. In my day, we taught 'em our language and to forget their own mumbo-jumbo as soon as possible. I used to be in charge of a teaching colony, you know, computer. Eighteen years. Everything from Aloeins to Zeltas and quite a few in the middle. They leant it, of course, and what thanks, eh? Said "thank you so much, we've been civilized" and kicked us off. And, damn me, if that bloody Lucinda Vrana woman didn't agree nine times out of ten. Of course, at first, we razed a few cities, showed them we were still boss. But

they got what they wanted in the end. Most of them didn't last five bloody minutes. Tribal wars, collapsing economies, drought and famine. And so, they came crawling back to us for help. Didn't get it, mind. Oh no. Made sure they learnt to stand by themselves. Couldn't have it both ways, could they? Mind you, put me out of a job. Still, not for ever. Soon got posted to this lot. My own ship, even. Not quite the same, but what ho.'

If he expected a reply, he was disappointed. BABE's face had gone. 'Computer?' he called lamely. 'Computer!'

Why weren't the women back yet? Surely they must have got what they wanted by now. Still, the message was good timing. As soon as Lloyd reported in, they could be off. No more missions for a while.

He was about to call up BABE and get it to tell the pilot, but then assumed it would already have done that.

Just waiting for his order to move out. Yes, everything was just as it should be.

He punched a communicator. 'Cassius. Send Rimananee in to me, there's a good chap.'

Time to get on with other business.

Back in the chamber where Jason and Emile had found Chris, everything was quiet.

Until BABE's face again appeared, hovering above the empty casket.

'The bait has been taken,' it said to no one in particular. Immediately, however, all the computer banks, screens and monitors came to life. 'The knowledge is implanted in the male. The scavenger ship should depart within one hundred and twenty minutes.'

A series of lights flashed in reply, meaningless to the human eye, but totally obvious to the sophisticated Prison Service computer image.

'Confirmed. Shut down all non-essential energy drains.'

Part of a far wall shimmered slightly and faded away, revealing a tiny antechamber. In it were two decaying corpses, both missing their heads. One was dressed in an

AMS uniform, the other a civilian with a rather distinctive yellow and black necktie, soaked in blood.

They were crossing the last bridge, easing their way around the dead AMS troopers and students, when Grierson screamed.

Everyone looked at her, Emile gripping her hand. 'Are you all right?'

'The... the bridge...' she stammered. 'I thought it was falling away. I thought I was going to drop.'

Connor pointed at the small entryway on the far side. 'The tunnel leading to the ladder is through there, Jeni. Not far to go now.'

'I tell you it's a trap.' Chris was standing, propped up by Jason, and they were trying to talk quietly. And failing.

'How do you know that?' Lloyd was crisp and authoritarian again. A leader faced with too many questions and too few answers, but a level head at least. Emile was glad of that.

'I honestly don't know,' Chris said. 'I don't even know who you are or... or who I am. But something in my head keeps hammering away that this place is a trap.'

Hallett shrugged. 'Let's worry about it elsewhere. The place is giving me the creeps.' She headed off to the metal tunnel leading to the ladder. A few minutes later, there it was.

Lloyd shooed them up, one by one. Only Townsend was missing, and Hallett volunteered to go back, but Lloyd shook her head. Townsend would catch them up. Even she wouldn't want to be left on this planet.

Marianne Townsend stood alone in the vast granite chamber, shaking her head.

Something was wrong, something was... Her head was fuzzy. She needed to think clearly, to get away from this place. Something in the city...

She reached into her backpack and stroked one of the objects she had picked up when they had first entered this underground complex. It was an AMS blaster, and now she weighed it in her hand.

Whatever was going on, whatever this was, trap or otherwise, her primary mission in life could now be fulfilled.

Siobhan Lloyd was going to die in the next three minutes.

'The flitter's still here,' announced Hallett, first up.

Connor was next, followed by Jason pulling and Emile heaving, with Chris's semiconscious body between them. Grierson came up next, while Lloyd brought up the rear, bellowing back down inside for Townsend to get her posterior into gear. Or some such, Emile thought wryly.

'I'd still like to know who created this crater and stuck this hatchway into it,' Hallett said.

Connor shrugged. 'I'm not entirely convinced we'll ever know,' she said. 'But maybe if Tolland will let me use the ship's scanners to probe this planet I could find something out.'

Lloyd laughed. 'Yeah, Alexander the Great's going to hand over the scanners to us.'

'Maybe Dr Njobe can help us,' offered Grierson.

'Does it matter?' Hallett pointed at their flitter. 'Can we just get back and argue later?'

'No one's going anywhere until I'm ready.' Townsend was emerging from the hatchway, a blaster aimed straight at Lloyd. 'I don't pretend to understand any of this,' she continued, 'but this I do know. Lloyd was killed back in that city, and we had to leave her body there. Anyone argue with that reasoning?'

Lloyd smiled. 'Well, I do, for a start -'

'Shut up!' Townsend was shaking slightly. Emile could see she was suffering shock. Or something. 'You don't have any say in this. I should have done this at Kamp Konkordia.'

'Marianne,' said Jason quietly, his own blaster pressing against her left ear, 'drop your gun on the ground, there's a good girl.'

'Shoot me then,' said Townsend. 'But the moment I die, so will Lloyd.'

'No she won't, because Lloyd is going to stand beside me.' Jason was directly behind Townsend, where she couldn't see



him. 'And if you so much as twitch your blaster to follow her, or if I see any pressure of the trigger, I'll blow your head off, and you'll never know if you killed Lloyd or not.'

For a few moments nothing happened.

Emile was holding his breath, keeping one eye on Jason, the other on Lloyd.

The taller older woman then moved, slowly to her right. 'I'm going towards Jason, Marianne.'

Townsend just let her blaster drop and Jason scooped it up, tossing it aside, and Lloyd picked it up.

Emile let out a sigh. 'Good bluff Jason -' he began.

'Emile!'

'But his blaster isn't charged up,' the boy finished, smiling at a very worried Grierson.

Jason sighed, pocketing his blaster.

And Townsend whipped out a second one, firing quickly and missing everyone. A second blaster shot hit her straight in the back. She jerked up and collapsed, Jason catching her before she fell back down the ladder and probably broke her neck.

Unless she was already dead.

'I set it on stun,' Lloyd told the others. 'Let's get her up to the *KayBee 2* and let Njobe have a look at her. Find out what's wrong.'

'Maybe she picked up a bug or something down there,' said Grierson.

Hallett agreed and suggested hurrying to the ship.

'What about them?' she added, pointing at the three men.

Lloyd aimed her blaster at them, and Emile gasped. After all they'd been through...

'You've two choices, Kane. Stay here on this lump of rock or come back with us.'

'That's a choice?'

'Oh come on, Jason, you know staying here is a bad idea.' Connor winked at him. 'Come with us.'

'They do have a doctor,' Emile put in, hoping Jason would agree to go. They had to get away from this planet somehow - surely he saw that. 'Chris would be in good hands.'

Chris was looking from one of them to another, clearly not understanding any of this.

‘OK. For Chris’s sake, we’ll go with you. Thanks.’ He addressed the last comment to Connor and Emile sighed inwardly. These so-called ‘responsible adults’. Always thinking with their groins. And *he* was supposed to be the kid of the team!

Ten minutes after the scavenger flitter took off, the computer bank in the chamber below ground began a new set of instructions. A countdown.

Far below the surface, a message pulsed through several other computers, alerting them to begin their own activation systems.

‘The Jithii are free. The Baygent Apotheosis can begin.’

The image of a dragon, claws raised, fire billowing out of the mouth, appeared on each screen.

Then cleared.

And amid it all hovered the smiling face of BABE.

Ghoti Rimananee shuddered as Tolland ran a chubby finger down her arm.

‘It’s very simple, my dear. I need someone with me all the time. A sort of secretary. Someone to act as my representative with your fellow prisoners. And in return, do you know what you get?’

‘My freedom?’

‘Hah! No, my dear, my gratitude. And that can be... quite pleasant, if you get my drift.’

Ghoti certainly got his drift. People on the *KayBee 2*, especially some of the other women, all assumed she was as naive as, say, Grierson. But because she had her beliefs, her ideals and her convictions, it didn’t shield her from reality.

It usually just gave her hope that there was always something better. Her great-grandparents had been among the original settlers in the Indra system, considered by so many to be brave, noble colonists, seeking out a new life with the traditional values, something for Ghoti to be proud of.

Instead, she had betrayed that great history and fled the system, joining up with a series of dubious profiteers, pirates and smugglers. Eventually she had met a young Cantryan who knew how to defraud the Administration bank in the Rim System, and with her computer hacking skills together they drew out fifty million shillings every five days. After three weeks, they thought it better to stop and make do, rather than be greedy.

They had escaped to the small colony of Dersius and had immediately fallen in with a group of Hindus, her Cantryan associate believing Ghoti would be overjoyed. She tried to leave, but he couldn't understand. Until the authorities arrived, alerted by their Hindu hosts.

She never saw the Cantryan again and was sentenced to the prison world Kamp Klondike. After six months there, she had been selected for duty aboard the *KayBee 2*, and now had to deal with Lloyd and Townsend trying to kill each other, Tolland's dubious advances and Grierson's perpetual queries about her beliefs.

Truth be told, Ghoti had given up believing in the requisite sacred cows years ago, but wore her tikka and meditated simply because it enabled her to get thirty minutes' peace twice a day.

And now it looked as if all her initial fears about Tolland were coming to fruition. Lloyd and the others saw him as a harmless bumbler, a stupid administrator who had obviously committed some crime of his own and was living out his enforced 'retirement' for the service. But Ghoti had met his kind before. Repressed egomaniacs, colonial management types who saw women as their sex-slaves and would never take no for an answer. They presented two different faces - the 'butter wouldn't melt' type to their peers, and the 'whips in the cupboard' type to those who really knew them.

'I'm very flattered, Governor,' she said fingers crossed behind her back. 'But I feel that my devotion to Ganesha would prevent me from helping you with the aid you... require.'

Tolland shrugged. 'Maybe I haven't made my position entirely clear, Rimananee. You will be my aide, adjutant, whatever. I am in charge of this prison and my word is law.'

Ghoti held her ground. 'I feel it only just to point out, Governor Tolland, that under the regulations of the service, a prisoner -'

Tolland grabbed her neck and squeezed very slightly. Ghoti tried to bring her own hands to bear, but Tolland's grip was surprisingly strong, and he just squeezed harder, bringing his lips very close to hers. When he spoke, she could feel his breath across her own lips, her nostrils and eyelashes.

'It would be very easy, my new dark-skinned Missy, to force you to work for me. But I don't work that way.' He let her go and Ghoti staggered to one knee, trying to get her lungs to take in air again. As her colour returned and her breathing eased, Tolland was back to his facile jovial self.

'I do hope you like fish, Rimananee. Guppy and Matilda will need excellent care and attention.' He glanced back at her. 'Oh. You may leave now. I'll see you tomorrow morning at eight.'

Realizing she had been dismissed, Ghoti moved slowly towards the door, breathed deeply and lifted her head up high. One day, Tolland would pay for all this. She would see to that.

'Chris is sleeping nicely,' said Njobe to Jason as she sat at the mess table. Grierson put a couple of bowls before them, filled with some vile-looking mush.

Emile gingerly dipped his finger into his own bowl and licked it. It was the worst thing he had ever tasted. Ever. Even the crap on the station was better than this.

Jason was in between Njobe, apparently their medical officer, and Connor (oh, what a surprise). Lloyd was next to her, and Grierson then slotted in beside the leader. Next to Emile was Hallett, alongside someone he'd been introduced to as Lisa DeJoine, but Townsend was nowhere to be seen. He assumed that after that stupid business with the gun, she

was sulking somewhere. Or, he hoped, too embarrassed to show her face.

Standing by the door was a Grutcha. Emile had heard of them of course. Apparently they were really savage and could rip a man's head off with their jaws. Seeing the huge doglike thing standing there, clawed paws, huge canine teeth and stony black eyes, panting slightly, he could well believe it.

'So, how come the MO is chowing down with the dregs of the universe?' asked Jason innocently.

Njobe raised an eyebrow. 'You met our beloved governor yet?'

'Nope.'

'Ah well, when you do, you'll see why I prefer Lloyd and the others for company. The only problem is Fido over there.' She indicated the Grutcha. 'I don't like being stared at while I'm eating. It puts me off.'

'I can see that,' said Jason. 'You've not touched yours.'

Njobe poked at her food with her fork. 'Yeah, well, I've seen more edible things in a culture tube.'

The door opened and Emile saw another newcomer walk in. Despite her dark skin, the red weals on her neck stuck out like a sore thumb. 'Is she ill?' he asked Hallett, but she was as confused as he was.

'Ghoti?'

'That obvious, are they?'

'What happened?'

The woman Ghoti glanced at the Grutcha guard. 'I walked into a cupboard.'

The other women nodded their understanding and returned to their food, leaving Emile none the wiser. She obviously had done nothing remotely like walking into a cupboard to get marks like that. But he also had enough sense not to push it. It clearly wasn't to be discussed in front of the guard.

Njobe pushed her plate back. 'I'd better go and check on Chris again. Nice meeting you two.' She nodded at Jason, then Emile, and headed to the door.

Emile caught Jason's eye. 'Well?'

'Well what?'

‘Well, how long are we staying here?’

Jason shrugged. ‘Dunno. Until this Governor Tolland says we can leave. Not much point in going anywhere until Chris is ready and we can be dropped off somewhere I can get a new shuttle.’ He was about to attack his mush when there was a shout from the door.

‘Get off me, you thug!’

All the heads turned to see the Grutchas and the doctor shoving each other. Connor went to get up, but Lloyd put her hand on Connor’s and the blonde sat still.

Emile turned and watched as the doctor almost thumped the guard. ‘If you don’t stop hassling me, I’ll ensure you are transferred to a garbage scow. Is that understood?’

Njobe disentangled herself and made her escape. The guard glared back at the woman and then followed the doctor.

‘What was all that about?’ asked Jason.

Hallett sighed. ‘Those two. His mate Brutus is ill, in Njobe’s medical centre. Cassius thinks she isn’t doing enough to help Brutus because she’s a Grutchas, not a human.’

‘And is she?’

‘Yeah,’ said Lloyd, ‘I think so. Grutchas have odd physiognomies and it’s taking Njobe some time to find out the cause of her illness, that’s all.’

DeJoine waved her fork about. ‘It also means that Cassius has to cope with all of us aggressive, dangerous Grutchas-eating women by himself. I think he’s nervous.’

‘Or in love with one of us,’ added Ghoti. The women laughed, but Emile couldn’t see the joke. The poor Grutchas was worried about his wife. Simple enough.

‘I’m going to check on Chris,’ he said to Jason, who was busy laughing with Connor. He didn’t wait for a reply.

Chris was dreaming.

He was there, in all that medieval finery, fighting for his life against the giant dragon, scales and claws, red eyes and fierce, consuming fire.

In his hands, he held a huge double-bladed sword, swinging it around expertly, deflecting the dragon's breath away from his body.

In anger, the dragon stamped a massive clawed foot down towards him, but Chris dived aside, scrambled back up and slashed into the foot.

With a roar the dragon staggered back, preparing to spit more sulphurous fire at him. Chris took the opportunity, while its neck was exposed, head back. He sliced straight through the neck, gouging a massive wound into the leathery hide.

Soundlessly, the dragon reared up, paws now trying to staunch the wound, red eyes streaming with fiery tears as its blood sprayed everywhere.

Chris took his second chance, driving his sword into the beast's side, ripping into its heart, tearing it apart.

The great beast fell instantly, dead, breaking Chris's sword as it did so.

Although now defenceless, Chris was relieved. He had succeeded in whatever his task was.

Until the body of the dragon shook again and split open. Something new was forcing its way out, something bigger and darker and -

He awoke with a cry, sweating, and struggled to sit up.

He was in some kind of medical room - the walls were bright and lined with glass-fronted cabinets. There was the telltale smell of antiseptic and there was a rhythmic thump-thump of monitoring equipment.

As he adjusted to this new environment, he realized that the white paint on the walls was actually a bit squalid and untouched. Some of the glass cabinets were cracked and most were very dirty. Wherever this hospital was, it wasn't one that deserved to be taking too much in the way of funds from his account.

Except... did he have an account? How did he know hospitals did that? How did he know this was a hospital?

He hid his face in his hands, imagining himself smashing his own skull with a sledgehammer, trying to knock some kind of sense about everything back into his head. Somehow he knew that he had forgotten things. There was no doubt about that, which in itself was more inconvenient than dangerous. Clearly he did exist, he did have memories, but they were buried somewhere.

‘Your name is Chris, so they tell me.’

He looked up and saw a willowy dark-skinned blonde woman beside him in the typical white smock of a medical person. She moved towards him with delicate precision, like a trained dancer, every part a moving one. Her lips were positioned in a genuine-looking smile and her brown eyes sparkled with humour.

She stood beside him, and took a pulse reading from his wrist.

He frowned.

‘I’m an old-fashioned country doctor at heart,’ she said. ‘Although the fact that the monitors are on the blink doesn’t help. Most of what you’re wired up to hasn’t worked for a few years, but it looks effective and keeps the governor happy. Luckily, I’m a good enough doctor not to need any of this except in a real emergency. At which point I break out the emergency power batteries.’ She finally stopped talking. ‘I’m Laurel Njobe. Your doctor.’

‘Where am I?’

‘Aboard a scavenger prison ship. The *KayBee 2*, actually. Your friends seem to have caused a bit of a stir with the governor. It’s all I could do to convince him not to stimulate you and question you. I insisted you needed to sleep properly. You’ve undergone something very strange.’

‘You talk a lot.’

‘I don’t want you to tire yourself out. Sorry.’

Chris smiled. ‘It’s nice to hear someone being pleasant, actually. I remember the prisoners who brought me up here, arguing. Trying to kill one another.’

‘That’ll be Lloyd and Townsend. Bad blood there, I’m afraid. Lloyd will always win because she’s got the intelligence to



support her authority. Townsend is all bluster and aggression. And when the chips are down, she'll run a mile.'

'Fact, professional opinion or just guesswork?'

Njobe laughed and Chris thought it was a very... well, pretty laugh. Nice. 'Like all good doctors, my diagnosis of Townsend is a bit of all three.'

There was a bleep and a red light lit up beside the doorway. Njobe shrugged. 'We have a visitor.'

She pressed a button on a device on her wrist and the red light went green, followed by the door opening.

Standing there was a shortish boy, about sixteen, with slight puppy fat, mousy brown hair and huge eyes, smiling. He seemed harmless enough, Chris thought. Had he been with the prisoners?

'Hi,' he said. 'May I come in?'

Njobe nodded. 'Just a few minutes. Chris has only just woken up.'

She smiled at Chris, then disappeared somewhere behind him, into another room.

The boy walked over and held his hand out.

Chris shook it.

'My name is Emile. Emile Mars-Smith.'

Chris said hello. 'I'm sorry, Emile. Do we know each other?'

Emile shook his head. 'No, but we have mutual friends. Jason Kane and Benny Summerfield.'

Chris frowned. Somewhere in his head two spotlights seemed to go on. He recognized the names but... but... there was something else there. Something blotting them out. 'I do know the names,' he said. 'But they don't mean anything at all. You were on the planet, weren't you? Is Jason the man with you?'

Emile nodded. 'He said I shouldn't try to push your memories, or they'd all hide away longer.'

'Maybe he's right. Is he a doctor?'

Emile laughed happily and clapped his hands. 'A doctor? Jason? Good grief, no. He's a pirate. Space scum, my father would have said. But he's a nice guy, too. Came to find you, I think.'

‘You think?’

‘Yeah, well, Jason’s reasons are never entirely what they seem to be. Benny says he’s always mixed up in dodgy deals and shouldn’t be trusted.’

Chris nodded. ‘I take it they’re married then.’ Where the hell did that notion come from?

But Emile said they were, once. ‘They still adore each other, but pretend to fight all the time. I’ve decided it’s my mission in life to get them back together.’

Frowning, Chris shook his head. ‘In my experience, things like that are best left alone.’ In his experience? How did he know what experiences he had had? He couldn’t remember his own name unless people kept reminding him.

Njobe walked back into the room. Chris could barely disguise his surprise at the creature that followed her out, a sort of man-sized Rottweiler dog, dressed in a bright-blue uniform, wearing a peaked cap.

‘This is Prison Guard Cassius,’ Njobe explained. ‘His mate, Brutus, is in the next cubicle.’

Cassius nodded to both men and exited. ‘Visiting time is over, Mr Mars-Smith. I gather that Cassius is sorting out a room for you and Mr Kane. Chris, you’re staying put for a while.’

Emile made his farewells and followed Cassius out.

‘Doctor,’ said Chris. ‘Why can’t I remember anything? They keep saying I’m this Chris Cwej, but I have no memory of it.’ He pointed to a readout above his head. ‘And I think my name ought to be pronounced Shvey not Cwej.’

Njobe clapped her hands in delight. ‘Proof that Jason probably does know you! He said that’d be one of the first things you’d say. Apparently everyone wants to say “Shvey” but you prefer “Cwej”. He says it’s something of a joke between you and your friends.’

‘Oh well, I guess that means we really do know each other.’

Njobe nodded. ‘And it’s my job to ensure that you are well enough to go back with him to wherever it is you’re going.’

‘Thank you, Doctor.’

In the command module, Ryne and Blummer were trying to play snap with half a deck of cards, while Smokey restlessly wandered about, mewing occasionally at the pilot.

‘Snap!’

‘I shouted first!’

‘No, I did!’

Ryne sighed. What was the point? ‘I gather that the prisoners are back.’

‘Brought someone with them, so the readouts say,’ muttered Blummer, waving a hand towards some controls Ryne had never actually bothered to examine to find out what they did.

‘Oh.’

Smokey mewed at the pilot again.

Ryne chuckled a handful of cards at the cat, who scarpered. ‘Noisy bugger,’ he said. ‘What’s upset him?’

Blummer shrugged. ‘Dunno, never understood him. Ever since I got him.’

‘Why’d you bring him aboard, Blummer? I mean, you’d get into a lot of trouble if the Prison Service found out.’

‘Nah, not any more. I won the right to take Smokey anywhere same time as I won certain other rights to this ship.’

‘Won what? How? When?’

Blummer settled back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head. ‘Ahh, a long story, that one, lad.’

‘Well, give me the kiddie edit rather than the director’s cut, OK?’

‘Truth is, lad, I rather fell out of favour with the PS Head of Operations, old Chubby Clayton.’

Smokey mewed again, from under one of the consoles.

‘Shut up, cat,’ grunted Ryne.

‘So, lad, he wanted to send me on a long voyage, back towards dear Mother Earth.’

‘Cor. I’d love to go there. Apparently I’ve got relatives still there somewhere.’ Ryne smiled.

Blummer coughed, ‘Am I telling this story? Anyway, I didn’t want to go so I challenged him to a game of dominoes.’

Slaughtered him using holodominoes. Not that he sussed. Each time I won, he wanted a best of three, best of five and all that. Not only did I get this job instead of the three-year haul to Earth carrying waste sludge, I got Smokey and the right to rename this old cruiser.'

'The *KayBee 2*?'

'The same, lad. She was the Gossamer Wing originally. I called her the Mister Kiss-Kiss Bang-Bang.'

'You what?'

'Named after a song from a few centuries back. A bit of the classics always does you good, lad. Better than this spacehop jiggery jump-jump you get today, I can tell you. When music was music.' He sighed happily. 'Always liked her, of course. So did my pa.'

'Who? Mrs Kiss-Kiss Bang-Bang?'

'Nah, the singer. Shrilly Bassett my pa called her.'

'Stupid name.'

'Oh, I don't know if it was her real name. He only had an old digital disc thing. Didn't have names on it, just song titles.' Blummer smiled. 'So that's how we got to be pilots aboard the *KayBee 2*, lad.'

Smokey mewed again, emerging from his hiding place.

'What's got into your moggie, Blummer?'

Blummer shrugged and looked around. 'He usually only gets agitated when something's going wrong. What can go wrong here, though, eh?'

Ryne looked at the cat. And thought about it. Where was Smokey usually at this time of day? Hunting space mice or with... with the pilot!

Ryne hurried over to the ladder and looked up.

The pilot was immobile, all his systems shut down. All his controls off.

'Goddess, Blummer, the pilot's conked out. We're not moving.'

Blummer stabbed at the controls beside him, but nothing happened. 'Everything's on, but nothing's actually happening, lad.' He yanked off a panel. 'If we're not careful, life support'll be next.'

The lights dimmed. 'I wish you hadn't said that, Blummer,' Ryne muttered.

Smokey yowled and the fur on his back rose.

Ryne nodded. 'Yeah, Smokey, it is getting cold.'

\* \* \*

In his office, Tolland was flicking through Lloyd's reports on his little pad when the lights dimmed.

'Computer?' Nothing. 'Computer! What the hell is going on?'

He glanced across to the safe behind his desk. It contained two of the blasters that Lloyd had brought up from the planet. Better to have them safely under lock and key - or at least a laser lattice - until they got back to Central, where the PS could pass them back to the military.

Trouble was, the lattice was off-line suddenly, leaving the blasters exposed. He ought to do something about that...

A bleep to his right alerted him. The lights in the fish tank were off, and the slow bubbling in the corner had stopped.

His pad died, blanking Lloyd's report.

He got up and tried the door, but it remained closed.

In the mess hall, the women were unusually quiet as they ate. Until the lights went out.

Grierson screamed in surprise and even Lloyd frowned a little.

'The power's out,' Hallett said unnecessarily.

DeJoine looked to Lloyd. 'The computer?'

'BABE?' Lloyd called out. But nothing happened.

Cassius, standing by the door suddenly gasped and bolted, leaving everyone staring at him in surprise, until Ghoti realized. 'The medical room. Brutus!'

Njobe was waiting for Cassius as he came running in.

'I do hope you didn't disturb our patient out there?' she said smoothly, as if everything was normal.

Cassius was beside Brutus, eyeing the life-support systems keeping her breathing. 'Is she all right?'

‘Of course she is, Cassie, darling. The medical centre’s power is not connected directly to BABE’s.’

‘BABE has done this?’

‘Well, do you know anyone else aboard capable of cutting all the power bar life support? Mind you, my skin tells me it is getting chilly around here. Do you feel anything?’

Cassius growled slightly.

‘Oh, bad dog. Naughty dog.’ Njobe suddenly stabbed a button on part of the monitoring system around Brutus. The female Grutchia spasmed suddenly. Njobe smiled at her unconscious patient. ‘Oh, sorry, doggie. Did the nasty-wasty nursie hurt you? Tell you what, you tell your big, brave hubby not to be so mistrustful.’ Njobe caught Cassius’s eye. ‘Because I should hate to have to kill him.’

Cassius stepped back. ‘We had an agreement.’

‘We still have, Cassie. Nothing will go wrong with Brutus - she’ll be up and about just as long as you do as you are told. Now, haven’t you got some prisoners to see to?’

Cassius touched his sleeping partner’s muzzle gently and then marched out.

‘I should have been a bloody vet,’ muttered Njobe, apparently to the air.

BABE’s Marilyn Monroe face shimmered into view, although Njobe didn’t look up. ‘A vet would have been of little use on this mission, Doctor.’

Njobe was resetting Brutus’s life-support systems. ‘Yeah, whatever. Are you finished with the planet below yet?’

‘Yes. Soon it will become another unexplained astrological phenomenon.’

‘Good.’ Njobe straightened up. ‘Tolland appears to be abusing one of the women by the way. I don’t know how seriously.’

‘We still need Tolland. He is a convenient liaison with the service.’

‘And we still need the women, don’t we?’

‘No. Not all of them. We have the traveller and we only need a few others. If Tolland wants to play, let him.’

BABE vanished, and Njobe shook her head slowly. Poor Ghoti Rimananee.

The assembled women looked up from their yeast mush as the lights strengthened and the temperature began to rise again.

The door opened and Cassius walked in, standing to attention. 'The problem has been solved,' he barked. 'You have four hours to prepare your equipment and ship before the governor requires you to return to the planet and retrieve the metals you discovered.' He pointed at Jason and Emile. 'He will see you two now.'

Much to Emile's surprise, Jason meekly got up and headed out. Emile followed.

Tolland was livid. No, more than livid: he was positively fuming.

'You could've hurt my blasted fish, you stupid lump of wires. How dare you take life support off.'

BABE was hovering beside the fish tank, pouting seductively, but to no avail.

'And I'm fed up with this stupid face of yours. I think it's time I dumped your programming and uploaded a new set of routines. One that Ryne and Blummer can't bugger up.' He patted the fish tank. 'Poor Guppy. Poor Matilda. Nasty fright, eh? Papa Tolland is very sorry.'

'Governor Tolland, there are no other programs for you to upload.'

Tolland frowned. 'Bloody nonsense, computer. Eighteen alternative options. I could make you anything from a dehumanized voicebox to Mickey bloody Mouse if I wanted to.'

'Not at all, Governor Tolland. I have erased all other potential programs.'

Tolland dashed to his desk, reached into a drawer and brought out his datapad, punching up a few codes. His look of amazement grew with each second. 'How... I mean when... why?'

‘To remove any potential threats to this mission.’ BABE winked lasciviously. ‘Try to ensure that I don’t have to consider you a threat as well, Ollie.’

Suddenly alone again in his office, Oliver Tolland felt rather ill.

\* \* \*

‘Waaaauughhh!’

Blummer loped over to the pilot’s area to find out what had frightened young Ryne. ‘What is it, lad?’

Ryne was panting. ‘The bloody pilot came back to life while I was unscrewing his elbow connection. Gave me a bloody electric bloody shock, it did.’

‘He’s back on line? Excellent news, lad.’

‘Yes, thanks, I’m fine actually. No really, don’t offer to get the first-aid box out.’ Ryne jumped the few steps back into the main module. Smokey rubbed against his ankle. ‘Yeah, at least someone shows a bit of concern.’ Ryne scooped the cat up and snuggled it as he wandered to his navigation console. ‘Here, Blummer, we’re getting ready to be on the move.’

‘Good.’

‘In fact, we must have been moving for ages.’

‘Don’t talk daft, lad. We can’t have moved an inch or BABE would have told us.’

Ryne jabbed at the scanner in front of him. ‘Oh yeah? Then why aren’t we in orbit around Ardethe any more?’

Blummer looked at his own controls. ‘By heck, Ryne, lad, you’re right. We’re miles away. When did we make that move? And why didn’t anyone tell us?’

‘So, who exactly are you two, anyway? And why were you on the planet?’

Governor Tolland worried Emile. But, frankly, Jason worried him more. Ever since he’d sacrificed the *Mother Fist* to come up here with Chris, he’d been quiet, almost sulky. Certainly too laid back and uninterested to be the Jason Kane he knew.

And this governor seemed to be sailing pretty close to the wind as well, but in a dangerous way. Maybe it was stress,



overwork or just basic insanity. Either way, there was something about the way he looked around the room all the time instead of directly at them, as if searching for something, that unnerved Emile no end.

‘Rescuing my friend Chris Cwej,’ Jason said.

‘Why? What was he doing on a planet formally declared off limits?’

‘I don’t think it was off limits when he arrived there.’

Tolland leant back in his chair. ‘I don’t like you, Mr Kane. I don’t want you on my ship. I shall have words with Lloyd as to why she brought you here. I don’t like my efficiency ratings taking a tumble just to pick up waifs and strays.’ As if noticing Emile for the first time, Tolland waved a chubby hand ineffectually towards him. ‘And why are you dragging a teenage boy around with you? Or shouldn’t I ask? Not very healthy you know. For either of you.’

Emile had had enough. ‘Listen, Governor, none of us, Lloyd’s people or me and Jason, would have survived what was down there if it wasn’t for each other. That’s why we came back with her. We owed it to each other to try and find out what killed all those people and why someone created a massive underground city.’

Jason groaned. ‘Nice one, ‘Meel.’

Tolland rummaged through the notes on his datapad. ‘I see nothing about deaths. Or underground cities. Just that there is a degree of metal down there that requires heavier cutting gear than that which is aboard the flitter.’

Emile wanted the ground to open up. Swallow him whole.

‘I’m sorry, Governor,’ said Jason. ‘As I explained to Lloyd when we first met, Emile suffers from a bit of a mental disorder. He sees things that aren’t there. Passes his boredom by creating stories about the places we’ve been. He’s my half-brother and guess who got lumbered with him after the plagues got the rest of the family.’

Tolland nodded. ‘Ah, right. Plague?’

‘Oh, we weren’t touched, rest assured. I’ve been working for... various organizations, doing odd bits of freelancing.’

‘And this Cwej chappie?’

‘An associate who went missing. That’s why I tracked him down all the way out here. Purely by coincidence your people landed here. We came back because my ship is wrecked. You can check with your scanners if you want. I’ll give you the coordinates.’

‘No, no, no. That won’t be necessary.’ Tolland steepled his fingers and leant forward, leaning his chin on the top. ‘Did you see anything of the missing AMS archaeologists or crew?’

‘No. Lloyd asked me the same thing. I saw no sign that anyone had been on the planet for years, bar Chris. We found his shuttle crashed at the base of the crater. That’ll show up too, I expect.’

Tolland tapped his datapad. ‘Did exactly that when I got Lloyd’s version. All checks out. But that aside, Mr Kane. As soon as your chummie is fit, I’d like you off my ship. Men and women, bad for morale you know. All gets a bit icky, if you get my drift.’

‘Oh absolutely, sir. First decent planet with civilization, the three of us will be out of your... uh... hair. Gone. Finito.’

Emile glanced at the governor’s thinning pate, and grimaced at Jason’s tactlessness.

Tolland offered his hand to Jason, who shook it. ‘In the meantime, I gather Cassius has found you somewhere to sleep.’

‘Indeed he has. A fine officer, I must say. You have all been very kind.’

Tolland nodded and waved towards the door, permitting them to leave.

Emile gave the governor a last look as the door closed behind them.

‘What are you playing at?’ he demanded of Jason.

‘And when will you get your brain working, ‘Meel? That man is in charge of this place. Apart from the fact we need his hospitality. Lloyd and I agreed not to mention anything from down on the planet other than the bare essentials. He’ll send another mission down to get the metal and it’ll give us a better chance to learn more.’ Jason shook his head.

‘Partners! Who needs ‘em?’

Emile decided he preferred Chris. At least he was unconscious most of the time.

Governor Tolland stared at the door, the image of the two men burnt on to his mind. They were lying, of that he was sure. Oh, he didn't doubt that the older one was mixed up with whatever crazies populated the bars and illegal establishments on the rim worlds. Yes, he probably had Mafia connections or mixed with the scum of the galaxy. But the youngster - he knew exactly what he was saying. Mental disorder - who *did* they think they were dealing with? Oliver Tolland had been lied to by experts, and this Kane fellow was as transparent as glass.

Which meant that dear Lloyd had also filed an inaccurate report. Why hadn't she got the metal? Wanting an excuse to go back down there? Underground city? What was going on down there?

In front of him was a hard copy of his orders to return to the service, along with his 'crew', prepared 'for debriefing'.

'Bugger that,' he muttered, and thumbed his communicator. 'Cassius? Find Marianne Townsend and bring her here.'

Hallett and Connor were in one of the storage bays, checking on the cutting equipment they'd need when they headed back to the planet.

'Are you feeling OK, Charley?'

Connor stopped and looked quizzically at Hallett. 'Yeah, fine. Why?'

'Oh I don't know. Townsend's been acting weird since we got back.'

'And the news is?' laughed Connor. 'Oh, c'mon, Townsend is weird. Always has been.'

Hallett wanted to agree. There was something about Townsend, something she remembered thinking about her on the planet. What was it?

'I can't remember,' she muttered.

'You what?'

‘Huh? Oh, nothing. Don’t worry about me. All that stuff down there’s freaked me a bit.’

‘Yeah, me too. Lloyd’s taking it in her stride.’ Connor humped another cutting-tool component into a crate. ‘If you must know, it’s Grierson I’m worried about.’

‘Lloyd’s influence?’

‘Nah, now you’re being Townsend’s mouthpiece. No, Jeni’s perfectly safe from Lloyd in that sense. I think Jeni’s too young, even for her. No, she’s not been her usual inquisitive self.’

‘Perhaps she was really scared. I know I was - and she’s a lot younger than either of us.’

Connor nodded. ‘Yeah, that’ll be it.’

The door slid open and Grierson walked in.

‘Oh, talk of the devil,’ Hallett muttered, and Connor smiled.

‘Back to normal, Jay?’

Hallett laughed. ‘Hey, I’ll be concerned behind her back, but not to the kid’s face. Where’s the fun in that?’ She smiled at Grierson. ‘Hiya, Jeni. What’s up?’

Grierson looked at them both. ‘I can’t find Siobhan, and Ghoti’s mediating. I needed to... to talk about something.’

They stopped working and indicated for her to sit with them. ‘What’s up, Jeni?’

‘Well, if we go back down like Siobhan wants, suppose whatever killed those people is still there. Without the city to hide in, it might come for us.’

Connor put a hand on her shoulder. ‘Nah, if it was going to kill us, it would have done so.’

Grierson’s eyes widened at that.

Hallett sighed. ‘What Charley means is that everything is fine. You’re going to be quite safe with us.’

Grierson smiled, clearly comforted.

Lloyd and DeJoine were doing final safety checks on the flitter, DeJoine at the controls.

‘What the hell... Lloyd!’

Lloyd was on the flight deck in a few seconds. ‘Lisa?’

‘Siobhan, look at these readings.’

Lloyd's jaw literally dropped open. 'But that... that's stupid. I mean, why did he move us?'

DeJoine shrugged.

'Stay here, Lisa. I'll go check with Alexander the Great. See what's going on. And give him a piece of my mind. Even if he has elected to leave, he could've bloody well told us. Instead of us wasting our time.'

Lloyd jumped out of the flitter and stomped off towards the upper decks. DeJoine shook her head. None of her business - she just did what she was told and waited for parole. Avoided getting into fights with Lloyd and Townsend, or religious arguments with Ghoti or annoying Cassius and Brutus. Just did her job and waited to go home. Free.

That way you stayed alive.

Tolland ran a chubby hand through his thinning hair, standing proudly beside his fish, knowing that it was a symbol to the women. They expected it of him. Indeed, they respected him for it. His devotion to Guppy and Matilda was an inspiration to them, he knew that.

Which was why his disappointment with Lloyd was paramount, and why it was time to throw a pigeon among the cats. He didn't like Townsend particularly, but knew this was the best way to keep Lloyd in line. And once order was re-established... well, Townsend's feelings were of no import.

There was a chime at the door and Cassius marched Townsend in.

'Thank you, Prison Guard Cassius. You may leave us.'

Cassius bowed slightly and left.

Tolland regarded Townsend from his monumentally important position in the room, both checking that she was prepared to listen, and double-checking that he had not made a mistake by choosing Rimananee as his new Missy. No, the dark girl had been the correct choice. Townsend was too muscular, too aggressive-looking. Too unlikely to be submissive when it counted.

'You wanted to see me, Mr Tolland, sir?'

Oh, very good. Very good. She knows when to flatter.

'You like fish, Townsend?'

'Only tropical fish, sir. Colourful ones.'

Oh don't ruin it, girlie. I like respect, not grovelling. Still, for the moment...

'Like Guppy and Matilda! Good. Good. Got sense, then. I have to say, Towns- Marianne isn't it?' She nodded. 'Well, he continued, 'I have to say... Marianne, that I think Lloyd has overstepped her mark rather by lying to me, don't you?' He waved the datapad at her. 'Not a mention of dead archaeologists, soldiers or mysterious cities.' That was what the boy said, surely?

'That's not for me to say, Governor.'

Tolland dipped his finger into the water of the tank, drawing the attention of the two fish. 'I understand there's a degree of tension between you two. Is that right?'

Townsend was good, he had to admit - the way she looked at her feet, tried to pretend she wasn't loving the chance to drop Lloyd in it. Good girl.

'Well, sir, I'm not one to tell tales...'

Tolland took his finger back, drying it on a small tissue. 'Of course not. In my day, girls were sugar and spice and all things nice - we're the puppy dogs' tails, eh?'

Townsend laughed lightly. 'Oh yes, Governor Tolland. But certainly, I do think Siobhan has been a little reckless in withholding important information - and bringing back those other people.'

'Still hasn't told me why she did so, Marianne. Have to say, I'm surprised. She's normally so efficient.'

'Hasn't she, sir? I doubt she's had time - unless...'

Tolland nodded mournfully, clasping his hands behind his back. This was going exactly to plan. 'Unless she wasn't going to, of course. You might be right there. In my day, people were honest. But, well, we've all got a little infected with lesser standards. Started when we gave little Johnny Native equality with humans. Allowed him to work alongside instead of work *for* us. Progress, I suppose. But it's really not on. Anyway, these lesser grades keep it all to themselves. No

respect for authority, you see. You respect authority, Marianne?’

‘Of course, sir!’

Tolland just stared at her, smiling bounteously. ‘Good grief! You were listening! Usually it’s just the fish that listen to me. Lovely fish, you know. Imported from Earth. Two poisonous fish. One jab from their spines and you’re dead within thirty seconds. But they don’t jab me. They respect my authority. Know who’s boss - so long as we treat each other well. That’s where Lloyd falls down: neither respects the other. I rather think, Marianne, that you ought to take over command.’

Ah, Townsend had the sense to look surprised. Good for her.

‘Well, I don’t know, sir...’

‘Oh! Come on, girl! It’s yours for the taking!’

‘Thank you, sir. I’ll try not to let you down. Now I ought to chase Lloyd and the others up.’

‘You do that “Top Dog” Townsend. I’ll let you pass the good news on to Lloyd. I’m sure she’ll appreciate hearing it from you. Now I want you ready to go down to the planet in thirty minutes.’

Townsend thanked him again and left.

‘Computer, how much longer can we stay in orbit around this planet?’

BABE appeared in front of the fish tank. ‘Our orders were to leave this system and head for Central, Governor Tolland.’

‘Yes, well, I don’t agree. Yet.’

‘Nevertheless we are no longer near the planet in question. I have what I came for.’

‘You have... what? What are you talking about? And how d’you mean, we’re no longer there?’

A hologram appeared in the middle of the room, showing the *KayBee 2* against a starry background.

‘Now, Governor Tolland, I am taking this ship on a new course away from this sector.’

Dumbfounded, Tolland sat in his chair and stared, even after the space scene had popped back out of existence.

‘Ba-back to Central? To the service?’

‘Of course not,’ said BABE. ‘I’m taking us where I want to go.’

As BABE’s Marilyn Monroe visage vanished, Tolland decided that the last few minutes had not happened. Well, they couldn’t have, after all. On-board computers didn’t just up and start running the show, did they, eh? Just didn’t happen.

Lloyd was just watching the next level come into view as she took the service elevator up. And then she spied Townsend marching towards her.

‘At bloody last. We could have used your help.’

Townsend just smiled. ‘And I was looking for you, too. Why are you up here and not with the flitter?’

Lloyd sighed. She was in no mood for Townsend’s ‘humour’. ‘Maybe I got lost. Try doing the same.’

Townsend didn’t move. She just folded her arms. ‘Oh, and I was so concerned.’

Lloyd began to head towards Tolland’s area, but Townsend grabbed her arm.

‘Palace revolution staged successfully, Siobhan. I’m Top Dog now. Your unfortunate omission in your report has been noted. And dealt with.’

If Townsend expected Lloyd to rant and rave, she wouldn’t give her the satisfaction. All this showed was how little Tolland understood the women - as if he could just make Townsend Top Dog and the others would automatically rally round to her - and how stupid Townsend was to think they would! ‘Fine. You better tell your new commander that his metal is gone.’

Townsend’s facade cracked a little. ‘You mean, we’re out of orbit?’

‘Yup.’

Townsend stepped back. ‘No. No, it can’t. Not like that. We can’t just leave, it’s not... not right. I mean... I mean... they might be here. With us!’

Lloyd stepped closer to Townsend. This was how she had been in the city. Panic-stricken. Out of character. ‘If we’re



gone, then... then... they've succeeded.' She suddenly gripped Lloyd's elbows. 'By the Goddess, Siobhan, we're too late. They're here. That Cwej guy was right. It was a trap and we fell into it. I saw them!'

'What the hell are you -'

Further discussion was halted by a terrible scream from the deck below, which ended abruptly. And incomplete.

Lloyd dragged Townsend into the lift, and seconds later back out before it had properly settled. DeJoine was waiting for them.

'It came from down here,' the other girl said.

'The toolroom? Connor and Hallett?'

Lloyd and DeJoine ran, Townsend half dragged, half stumbling, after them.

They rounded a corner, yanking open the doors to the toolroom.

'Cruk,' DeJoine said, grasping the door for support.

'Oh, no... no...' Townsend pulled back and turned her head away. 'It's here. They've started...'

But all Lloyd could see were three bodies. Connor and Hallett on their backs, their hands, arms and chests soaked in bright-red blood, both staring straight up at the high ceiling.

The third body... was it Ghoti? No, the skin was the wrong colour, but that meant... that meant it was... was...

'Jeni!'

Lloyd was beside the body in a second, screaming out Grierson's name in denial.

Then she realized that although she was yanking up the body, cradling its blood-splattered shape, it no longer had a head.

Just a ripped-apart neck, still gushing crimson blood all over Lloyd and the floor.

## I MARRIED A MARTIAN

The Witch and Whirlwind was, Bernice realized with shock, totally empty. Not just half full, or even sparsely populated. Nope, it was empty of all sentient life.

Except Charlie, the robarman. But he didn't count. Not right now. In fact, after that 'Yes, Miss Summerfield' incident, it was very lucky that he still had his two arms with which to pull pints and clean glasses. However, Bernice was now forced to talk to him.

'Charlie,' she said darkly.

'Afternoon, Professor,' he said, clearly not recalling his previous faux pas. 'Bit empty today, isn't it?'

'Yeah, why?'

Wolsey rubbed against her ankle and she stood next to a bar stool, unwilling to get too comfortable. 'Jack Daniel's straight and a saucer of cream for my chum.'

Charlie nodded and went off to fix the drinks.

'Penny for them?'

'Hello, Irving.'

Braxiatel sat beside her, a Scotch in one hand, a saucer of cream in the other.

How did he do that? Every time this happened she intended to find out. But some other pressing engagement, like fighting for her life on some war-torn planet, always stopped her. That or marking test papers.

Charlie was at the other end of the bar, cleaning glasses, as if her request had been deleted from his memory banks.

'Any news?'

Braxiatel swivelled round on his stool, so his back was to the bar and he stared out at the various colleges of St

Oscar's. Different architectures, different cultures. And all beautiful to everyone.

'Earth Literature's empty. The D.H. Lawrence Building is closed for a while,' Braxiatel said quietly.

Bernice let this sink in. The leading academic at Earth Literature was Doctor Archduke, their friend with contacts in low places.

'Where's he gone?'

Braxiatel waved his hand around the bar. 'Why is this place empty, Benny?'

She thought about it, then checked her watch.

Wolsey mewed.

'It's the bloody programme isn't it. On Channel 8,' Bernice finally said.

"Ripley's Believe it or FO", I understand it is called. Very popular with students, notably the human male students.'

Wolsey jumped on to Bernice's newly formed lap, then the bar, annoyed that he'd had to wait to get at the cream. 'Yeah,' Bernice said, 'because it's that blonde bimbo presenting it.'

'Tonight's show is four minutes shorter than usual,' Braxiatel said. 'According to a friend who... well, let's say owed me a favour, I learnt about two hours ago that Doctor Archduke paid the holostudio a visit. Shortly afterwards, the crew learnt that a prerecorded segment they were expecting to show had been excised.'

'Something about Ardethe?'

'Sort of. Something about that area of space.' He held up a tiny crystal. 'I, of course, have a very good copy.'

Bernice rummaged in her pocket and produced the datapad she had played Jason's messages on.

'You read my mind, Professor Summerfield.'

'You think the things I like to read, Professor Braxiatel.'

He placed the crystal into the pad and immediately the well-endowed presenter burst into life.

'Now, there has been much talk on the nets and webs recently about the lost mission to Ardethe. But we have to ask, did they even get to Ardethe, or has something stranger than fiction happened?'

A star chart appeared, the voice continuing over the top.

‘Long-range scans showed the mysterious arrival of a tenth planet in the system, between the third and fourth planets. Our investigators at RBIOFO believe that this new world is what the archaeologists touched down on.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ muttered Bernice. ‘How the hell did they get this?’

‘However,’ continued the presenter, now back in vision, ‘where did this new planet mysteriously come from? Forget the legends of Ardethe - what is this new legend? In our next news update, we’ll have some answers for you, but if you think you can explain how a planetary body can move into a system without anyone noticing, contact us at Network 7.’

Braxiatel removed the crystal. He said nothing for a moment, which confused Bernice. It was unusual for Braxiatel not to offer up some theory - the wilder the more accurate, usually.

‘Well, it’s obviously on an elliptical orbit,’ he said at last. ‘About once every five hundred years or so, to be that rare.’

‘That’s not very wild,’ Bernice muttered, ‘but probably quite accurate.’

Braxiatel sipped on a sherry that he hadn’t had moments earlier. ‘Benny, I hate to ask you this, but what has your ex-husband been up to since you last saw him?’

‘Jason? Well, he’s probably up to his neck in debt, dodgy women, various unscrupulous schemes for making fast shillings and be vies of beautiful women. Or desperate ones, at least.’

Braxiatel nodded. In a way that suggested to Bernice that he wasn’t nodding in agreement with her at all.

‘OK, Irving. Theories please.’

‘Firstly, Archduke gets this segment of an innocuous broadcast cut. Why? We know he has a few fingers in the pies belonging to the Knights of Jeneve. And we know we don’t like them much.’

‘Distrust rather than dislike, Irving.’

‘I have to confess that distrust it is. What interest could it be to the Knights that this planet drifts into the same system as Ardethe?’

Bernice thought about the Knights. An old order of agents, double-agents, back-stabbing triple-agents and generally duplicitous people determined to see Earth as a prime mover and shaker in galactic events, while keeping the planet’s nose clean. They’d been around for years, falsifying documentation to cover their tracks, creating whole generations of blind alleys to enable them to do whatever it was they did in secret and safety. They weren’t too particular about their methods and if people got in their way, they tended to disappear.

‘They wanted something on that planet and had to wait until its peculiar orbit brought it into line?’ Bernice suggested.

‘And if they had the right agent in the vicinity

‘Jason? Working for Archduke and the Knights? Get real, Professor! I wouldn’t trust Jason with my dirty laundry – the Knights aren’t going to trust him with one of their dark missions, are they?’

Braxiatel shrugged.

‘Only a theory, my dear. But it would explain why he stole your information about the planet.’

‘He stole the stuff about Ardethe!’

‘No, he stole both. But if he’d gone to the real Ardethe - assuming such a place exists - would he not have been in touch by now?’

Yeah, gloating and preening. But much as Jason was lowlife fetid scum not fit to lick out Wolsey’s bickie bowl even if he was starving, working for the Knights just wasn’t his style.

Was it?

‘There are times, Irving, when I think I married someone who only looked human but deep inside was from another planet altogether.’ Then another thought struck her. ‘What about Emile?’

Braxiatel smiled. ‘He’ll be all right. He seemed fairly confident, with his head screwed on properly. Now, shall we

wait here for news, or head to the Outer Rim ourselves and catch up with your errant ex?’

Bernice lived up to her middle name and surprised herself. ‘No. If, and it’s a big if, Jason is involved with the Knights of Jeneve, I can only think it’s for the right reasons. We could go charging in there and cause no end of problems. I can’t have a civil conversation with him in this college. If he’s surrounded by gun-toting Knights, murderous alien inquisitors and blood-sucking mutants, I think my presence might only make things worse.’

‘Actually, I find that rather tempting.’ Braxiatel stroked Wolsey, who mewed contentedly.

‘Traitor,’ muttered Bernice. ‘Just because he gave you real cream.’ She smiled at Braxiatel. ‘I need time to think about this.’

‘We might not have long, Benny. Think quickly.’ Braxiatel stood up, bowed slightly and walked off.

Bernice turned and held Wolsey under his chin. ‘Well, pussycat, what’s to do?’

Rather unhelpfully, Wolsey licked her chin and accidentally dipped his tail in her Jack Daniel’s.

## HAPPY HUNTING GROUND

‘So, what killed her then?’

Doctor Njobe sighed for what seemed to be the hundredth time. ‘I have no idea, Governor, and have little chance of finding out if you insist on filling my medical area with some sort of inquest.’ She waved a hand impatiently. ‘Go clutter up your own office instead of mine.’

Emile was feeling very uncomfortable. As far as he could gather poor Grierson was found dead - minus her head, most of which the doctor had determined was spread across Hallett and Connor. They were both in comas, unmoving and unresponsive. Jason was sitting with Connor, ignoring everything around him. Typical. Townsend, Lloyd and DeJoine had discovered the grisly scene, and Ghoti had been meditating. Cassius had been with Brutus and the doctor. Chris, of course, was in his bed. Rather inconveniently this made him and Jason the prime suspects, if it was murder. And frankly, people’s heads did not explode for no reason very often in his, admittedly limited, experience.

‘Right. Everyone in my office. On the double. Trot trot!’ Tolland began shoving the women aside. ‘Cassius, make sure everyone is there in five minutes, there’s a good chap.’ He turned to Ghoti. ‘And you, Missy, can arrange some refreshments for everyone. I’ve no doubt this has unsettled you all.’ He hurried off while a resigned Ghoti did as bidden.

As the others began to file out, Emile grabbed Jason. ‘We’ve got to go, Jase. Tolland wants us.’

Jason didn’t look around. ‘I assume the likely outcome of this has occurred to you, ‘Meel?’

‘What? Us as major candidates for trial and execution? Yeah. Best to go and defend ourselves.’

Jason shook his head. 'No, I'm going to play distressed boyfriend for a while, see what I can pick up here. You go.'

Great. On his own, with Lloyd and the others, let alone Tolland, ready to suggest he was responsible. 'Thanks. You're such a help.'

He turned away from Jason and followed the others, stopping briefly beside Lloyd. 'I'm so sorry, Siobhan. I know how fond of her you were.'

Lloyd gazed down at him, as if suddenly noticing him for the first time. 'Yeah. Yeah, I am. Was.' She sighed. 'Poor kid. She did so many bad things and never knew. But whatever, she didn't deserve this.'

Emile frowned. Surely Grierson was some innocent caught up in things.

'She tell you anything?' Lloyd asked grimly.

Emile nodded, and related the story about Sheriff Hyckman's house and her as a nanny. 'She was very disappointed that they didn't visit her in jail, I remember that. Do you think they'll want to know about this?'

Lloyd shook her head. 'I doubt it. The reason they ignored her in prison was because they wanted her dead. She murdered their children in a frenzied knife attack. Turns out she'd done the same to her own brothers and sisters and her father. Her mother's somewhere in a medical establishment, blissfully unaware of anything beyond her need to eat, shit and sleep. It was quite a case at the time - how a known killer could slip through the Administration and get to look after children.'

She took a last look back into the medical area. 'Poor bitch blotted both events from her memory and created this fantasy of being some poor little rich girl mixed up in things she couldn't understand. She never had any chance of parole after this trip. It was just an illusion to stop her flipping out again.' Lloyd smiled sadly. 'I kind of took her under my wing, to try and protect her from herself. The more aggressive she got, the more chance of the memories returning and the Goddess knows how homicidal she could have become then.'



Emile took Lloyd's hand. 'Why didn't you tell Townsend and the others? Townsend clearly picked on your relationship with Jeni because she thought you were trying to seduce her.'

Lloyd laughed. 'Townsend was just as aware of Jeni's past as me - we were both at Kamp Konkordia together, we followed the trial. No, Townsend would always find someone for me to have a "crush" on and ride me about it. She's done it as long as I've known her, I don't give a damn about her, though.'

Emile giggled. 'Form an attachment to me - that'll confuse her.'

But Lloyd didn't smile back. 'Townsend's already screwed up about something. Something she saw in that city, or thought she saw. She was convinced we'd brought something back with us, something that was going to get her.'

Cassius suddenly loomed out of the shadows behind them. 'The governor is waiting for you.'

They let him lead them forward.

The dragon bellowed, snorting great sheets of flame across the ground. The shrubs, grass and fences surrounding the castle shimmered and fell into dust under the onslaught.

Chris was aware that there was a man beside him - his squire.

'Baygent! Get back!' he cried.

'This has to be protected, My Lord!' Baygent waved his sword around. 'Only you can help us. You hold the secret within you!'

Another sheet of flame, and when it cleared Baygent was a charred skeleton. Almost comically, his sword dropped from his lifeless fingers, and then the whole collection of burnt bones dropped into a heap.

The castle was on fire - he could see his fellow Knights dashing around, trying to bring it under control. But the moat was evaporating under the dragon's smoke and fire.

It was up to Chris to save them all...

‘Chris?’

His eyes opened quickly, the bright light of the medical bay flooding into them, making him squint momentarily.

‘Hello there.’

The man who awoke him looked very familiar. A word formed on his lips. ‘Jason?’

‘Spot on, Chris. You remember me.’

‘No.’ Chris was aware his voice sounded hoarse. Maybe it always sounded that way. ‘No, I just remember being told that was your name. By you.’

Chris tried to sit up, but this Jason person held him back a bit. ‘It might be useful for everyone if you stay flat on your back,’ he said. ‘I don’t want the powers that be here knowing you’re getting better.’

‘Why?’

Jason sat beside him, and Chris wriggled a bit so he was at least comfortable. Jason spoke sotto voce.

‘There’s been a murder here. One of the prisoners. Me and Emile make for good scapegoats. But if you’re still ill, they won’t chuck us off the ship.’

‘Did you do it? The murder.’

Jason looked so shocked at the question that Chris felt guilty.

‘Hell, your *memory* must have gone. No, rest assured I may be many things, but not a killer. Even Benny never thought that.’

‘Benny? Who is he?’

Jason sighed. ‘He’s a she. My ex-wife. An old friend of yours. You were my best man. Twice. Sort of. But only once for me. The other time for my clone. It’s a long story.’ Jason shook his head. ‘This loss of memory is bad news.’

‘But we were friends?’

‘Oh yeah. You. Me. Benny. Roz...’

‘Roz?’

‘Yeah, well, save that one for later. Basically, as your friend, I need you to play the sick patient for a bit longer. Something very weird is going on here.’

Jason recapped everything he knew: from his and Emile's crash on the planet that wasn't Ardethe, through their discovery of Chris and meeting Lloyd and co. in the city, to the death of Grierson an hour back.

Chris tried to take it all in. 'I was in a chamber. There was a voice, a female voice... telling me things. Things about something called... called... Jithii? What's a Jithii?'

'Ah, good to see you're feeling better, Mr Cwej.'

'Doctor Njobe! Don't do that,' gasped Jason. 'Sneaking around like that could give your patient a heart attack. Or at least his visitor.'

'I think I'd like Chris to get his strength back if that's OK with you, Mr Kane.'

Jason stood up, smiling. 'I always obey doctors,' he said. 'Inevitably they know best.' He turned away, then threw a final glance at Chris. 'I'll be back later. Hope you feel a bit better then.'

He left.

Njobe punched a couple of buttons on the equipment Chris was attached to. 'You seem to be making good progress, Chris. Strong constitution, I must say.' She glanced at a few other things, but Chris couldn't understand any of it.

'Interesting. Your DNA is a little... complicated.'

She seemed to be speaking very loudly, thought Chris. Why? Perhaps it was just him.

'Bepple.'

'I'm sorry?'

'I... I don't know. Something about my DNA - bepple.' A bright light flashed in Chris's mind, and he glimpsed a huge furry teddy bear, man-sized, carrying a gun. 'Yes! Yes, where I come from, bepple is a process whereby you can... create temporary new bodies or disguises for yourself. Sort of... fun.' A memory. He knew that was a memory of his past. Something was coming back.

Njobe was still staring at the readouts, still speaking more loudly than normal. More... slowly. Thinking aloud perhaps. 'DNA impure then. Could account for a lot.'

Chris looked up at her eagerly. 'My memory must be coming back, yes?'

Njobe seemed distracted. 'What? Oh, yes. Yes, that's very good.' She switched off a couple of machines. 'Rest now, Chris. We'll talk later.'

Before he could reply, the door slid open and Cassius the doglike guard walked in.

'Ah, Cassie. Come to see Brutus? Come this way.'

With an almost imperceptible nod to Chris, Cassius followed Njobe into the next room, closing the door behind them.

Why was she so interested in his DNA?

And who the hell was Roz?

Jason stood alone in the toolroom, staring at the drying blood and bits of bone on the floor.

'Not much to represent your life, is it Grierson?' he said aloud.

What would Benny do if she were here, apart from annoy the hell out of everyone? Make herself very unpopular, want to investigate and think she was Miss Marple's younger sister.

He, however, had a variety of choices. Chris was getting better and he had a responsibility to get Emile home safely. Time to nick a flitter and get away? Nah, on a ship like this the protocols to stop the prisoners doing just that would prohibit any obvious form of escape. All he could do was sit tight, wait for an opportunity to present itself naturally and make his farewells.

Maybe Charley Connor could come with him. Yeah, that'd piss Benny off!

Except Charley was in the medical area, unconscious, possibly responsible for turning a teenage girl's head into pulpy little fragments.

He wondered how Emile was getting on with Tolland.

Emile was wondering where the hell Jason had got to.

Tolland was standing next to his fish, Ghoti was standing slightly to one side, and every time Tolland waved an arm, she flinched. A couple of times her hand went to her throat, and Emile suddenly understood the marks there.

The bastard! What had he done to her?

‘Now listen, something happened in the toolroom. I have no doubt that Doctor Njobe will discover what, how and why. Until then, we must carry on as best we can. I have decided to head back to Central and report to the service. I therefore consider this mission aborted. I have sent my instructions to the pilot and a course is being laid in now.’

‘What about the metals Lloyd found on the planet below?’ Ghoti frowned. ‘I mean...’

‘There is no planet below us, Ghoti,’ said Lloyd. ‘We’ve gone.’

‘Gone? When? Why?’

‘I suggest asking Doctor Njobe,’ Lloyd said. ‘After all, she’s going to solve all our other problems.’

‘Do I detect that you don’t favour my approach to these... incidents, Lloyd?’ Tolland placed his hands behind his back. ‘Well?’

‘I sure as hell don’t favour putting Townsend in charge, no. That’s like giving a four-year-old a lighted match to play with in a gas station.’

Townsend stepped forward. ‘Nevertheless, Lloyd, I am now in charge of everyone on the prison level. I suggest you remember that.’

Ghoti and DeJoine shot a look to each other. Emile could see panic written on their faces - so even they didn’t rate

Townsend. What was Tolland doing?

‘Oh, I’m only too happy, Marianne. You see, when we get back to Konkordia and our Parole Board, it’ll be noted that Grierson died on your watch.’

‘No one’s going to miss a child-killer, Lloyd. No one except the dyke who wanted to bed her -’

Emile could not remember seeing anyone move quite so fast. Lloyd’s hands were on Townsend’s throat before anyone else could move. Tolland just stepped back, standing

protectively in front of the fish tank. DeJoine tried to pull the women apart, and Ghoti began to flounder.

Emile looked around the room and saw various bits and bobs on Tolland's desk. He ran over and swept everything to the floor, the crashing and shattering distracting everyone.

Townsend pulled herself away from her attacker, giving DeJoine and Ghoti an opportunity to stand between them.

Tolland was apoplectic. 'What the ruddy hell d'you think you're doing, boy?'

'Stopping any more of your prisoners killing each other, Governor.' Emile's heart was beating faster than it ought to. What exactly *was* he doing? 'Instead, I suggest we find out exactly what happened to all three people in the toolroom and take it from there.'

Lloyd was breathing deeply, and slowly dropped to one knee, head bowed. 'You know, Townsend. If you want the responsibility, it's all yours. I don't give a shit. But you ever say anything about Grierson again, and I'll rip your head off.'

'Isn't that what someone did to her?' taunted Townsend, but Lloyd was sensible enough not to react. Emile was grateful for that.

Tolland coughed. 'I just wonder exactly what you and your friends were doing at the time of the death.'

Oh boy, he'd been waiting for this. 'Nothing. We were in our quarters, unseen by anyone. Neither Jason nor I have any alibi. You'll just have to accept our innocence. Or guilt. We can't prove a thing.'

'Jason!' Townsend suddenly cursed. 'Where's Jason Kane got to?'

One day Emile Mars-Smith, you will learn to keep your big trap firmly closed.

Chris strained to listen at the door. He was out of his bed, having detached all the wires and threads, although making a mental note of what went where if he needed to reattach himself quickly.

The other side of the door were Njobe and Cassius. And the bodies of the three women.

He listened hard.

'No reaction,' was the first thing he could hear from Cassius.

'There has to be something.' Njobe hit something in what Chris assumed was frustration. 'Why did it leave Grierson? It wasn't supposed to until I was ready for it.'

There was another voice, a female one, but vaguely electronic. 'What has caused the neural shutdown of these two?'

'I don't know, Babe. Stop pestering me. Go and do something useful.'

Who was Babe? One of the prisoners he hadn't met yet? And why was the voice so familiar?

'Tolland is investigating the three men. He has now reasoned that they might be responsible for Grierson's termination.'

'Excellent news, Babe. That should keep him busy. Can they provide alibis?'

'No. Only Chris Cwej, who was here with you.'

'Good.' Njobe stopped talking and something could be heard moving about. 'Cassius, it might be an idea if you go and add to the confusion. Say you saw one of them - the young one - near the toolroom a few minutes before. It'll be your word against his.'

'That would be a lie. It is not honourable to lie.'

The electronic voice, Babe, spoke again. 'In ten hours we shall have reached our destination. Your part will be over by then.'

'And Brutus?' asked Cassius. 'When will she be revived?'

'In ten hours and one minute.'

There was a pause and then Chris realized that Cassius was moving, probably towards the door he was listening at. Chris nipped back into the bed, wrapping the wires back around himself. Hopefully Cassius wouldn't know too much medicine and see if he got anything misplaced.

He had just closed his eyes when the door slid open and he heard Cassius move by his bed and out.

Chris decided enough was enough. He needed to warn Jason and Emile that they were being set up by the dodgy doctor, the guard and someone called Babe.

Jason was sitting in the toolroom when Townsend, Lloyd and the others marched in. He smiled at them.

‘Is this the lynch mob?’

‘Where were you when Jeni was murdered?’ Townsend came right up close.

‘Oh, “Jeni” is it now? And Njobe has officially declared it was murder. I see.’

‘Well?’

‘Well, as I suspect Emile has said, sitting in our room, watching the world go by. Literally. We could see the planet move away through our little window.’

Emile tried not to look too surprised. They had seen nothing of the sort. What was Jason up to?

‘Anyway, I gather, then, you’ve come to a decision that I killed Grierson and you’ll, oh, space me? Chop my head off?’

‘You’re very calm for a man on trial.’ That was DeJoine.

‘Oh, I thought we’d already been tried, and convicted. After all, it’s better for all of you if it’s me and Emile. Much cleaner. Tolland would like that especially.’

‘Why?’

‘Because if we weren’t here to blame, it’d have to be one of you.’

Ghoti shrugged. ‘Maybe if you hadn’t been here, Grierson would still be alive.’

‘No.’

‘How can you be so sure?’ asked Lloyd.

‘Because we didn’t kill her. So we would have made no difference.’

There was a noise as the door slid open again and as one they turned to look.

‘Chris!’

Chris Cwej ignored them all, heading straight for Jason. ‘It’s a trap.’



Lloyd pushed into him. 'You've been saying that since we met you.'

'No, I mean here. On the ship. You've been set up by Njobe and another prisoner.'

'What other prisoner?' Townsend found this amusing. 'I'm beginning to wish these guys would at least get their stories straight.'

Jason grabbed Chris's arm. 'This is important, Chris. Can you remember who she was?'

'I never saw her. But I heard her speak. And Njobe called her Babe.'

'BABE!' Townsend laughed. 'BABE killed Grierson now? Is that your story?'

'Who is BABE?'

Jason shrugged. 'The computer. Looks like Marilyn Monroe.'

Chris frowned. 'The voice... yes, a holographic face. I remember seeing that somewhere ..He smacked the side of his head. 'Oh, come on head, get into gear!'

'This is all very interesting but -'

'Shut it, Townsend.' Lloyd looked at Ghoti. 'What d'you think? Could BABE be misused by Njobe to do things?'

'I don't know. How many doctors are trained in programming computers anyway? I could try hacking into BABE and see what I turn up with.'

'Great. Use Cassius's quarters. Lisa, go with her.'

'Can I remind you that Tolland placed me in -' Townsend was cut off as Lloyd reached over and lifted her off the floor.

'I've put up with almost as much as I can cope with from you, Marianne Townsend. Shut up and put up or go away.'

Ghoti and DeJoine headed off to get access to BABE, and so Emile followed them.

The last thing he heard was Chris, Jason and Lloyd planning their next move.

Townsend skulked back towards the door. This was not going right. Ever since she had seen those... seen those... what was it she had seen on the planet? In the city?

Why couldn't she remember? And now all Lloyd did was shout at her and boss the others around. But Tolland had put her in charge. Marianne Townsend was in charge. Yeah. Tolland, he'd know what to do about Lloyd and the others trying to sabotage BABE.

The corridor leading to Cassius's quarters was long and dark. It smelt... musty. Doggie, Emile decided.

Not that he'd ever owned a dog. Pets were not considered the way of the Natural Path. But he'd known other people who kept pet dogs.

This corridor just stank worse.

'Here,' muttered DeJoine. Ghoti was already picking at the elaborate alarm system with a couple of pieces of wire. After a moment's wait, it beeped, flashed green and the door slid open.

The smell got worse.

'Boy, am I glad I don't have to shag him,' DeJoine muttered.

Ghoti went straight to the computer terminal, activating it.

PASSWORD

Ghoti typed in a series of letters and numbers that Emile couldn't follow.

PASSWORD ACCEPTED

'What was the password?' Emile asked.

'No idea.' Ghoti was tapping at more keys. 'I just overrode the need.'

A menu appeared. 'Bloody keyboard,' Ghoti grumbled. 'It's designed for paws and claws, not human hands. This is going to take a bit longer than I thought. Oh for a vocally operated computer.'

'No safeguards that way,' muttered Emile. 'And, after all, you are all criminals.'

No one laughed.

Ghoti was typing aggressively now. Emile didn't know how long she had been wanting it to take, but he was impressed by her speed anyway.

DeJoine kept an eye on the door. 'Call up a crew manifest,' she suggested. 'It might say whether or not Njobe could reprogram BABE.'

++SEARCH PARAMETERS++

Ghoti typed in

MEDICAL.

Then

NJOBE, LAUREL.

++NO MATCH++

'You what!' DeJoine joined her. 'Well... try... try...'

'Why not try listing the medical staff?' suggested Emile.

'Good call,' Ghoti said, tapping on the oversize keys.

LIST MEDICAL PERSONNEL

The screen changed and a picture of a young, dark-haired woman in a white coat appeared.

++MEDICAL OFFICER ASSIGNED TO SCAVENGER SHIP 3 - KRANTEN, DOCTOR AYN. TRANSFER DETAILS FROM CAL'MED 2 ISSUED. APPROVED BY PRISON SERVICE++

'Well, that's not Njobe,' Emile said rather pointlessly.

DeJoine clicked her fingers. 'Get up a prisoner manifest.' Ghoti did so. 'There!' DeJoine pointed excitedly. 'There she is.'

'Prisoner Number six. Why is she listed as a prisoner?'

'I wonder if Tolland knows this,' said Emile.

'He must do. He's the blasted governor. It'd be his job to know.' DeJoine pouted. 'It'd also explain why he's as rude to her as he is us.'

Ghoti pointed excitedly. 'Guys, look at this. Laurel

Njobe died three months before this journey began. See the date!'

Emile leant forward. 'Can you access service records? See if Aynn Kranten is still alive?'

After a couple of minutes' digging, Ghoti pointed to a report. 'She died about a week ago.'

Emile considered this. 'So the ship's proper doc dies. A prisoner dies and is replaced.'

'Why not replace Kranten?'

‘Because the body and records of a prisoner are easier to modify? Someone wanted a spy put aboard the *KayBee 2* and who better than the ship’s medico?’

DeJoine said she’d go and tell Lloyd and hurried away.

‘This is all supposition, Emile,’ said Ghoti. ‘*Good* supposition though. Still doesn’t tell us who killed Grierson. Your friend Chris would have seen Njobe leave.’

‘It’s still all supposition, Lisa,’ said Lloyd.

‘Yeah, but it makes sense to me,’ said Jason. He smiled at DeJoine. ‘I think you’ve hit the nail right on the head.’ He looked at the others. ‘Look, something is on that planet, right? It’s a trap, according to Chris, and we fell into it.’

‘Why did he know it was a trap?’ DeJoine shrugged. ‘OK, I know I wasn’t there, but indulge me.’

Lloyd interrupted. ‘Townsend was affected too. She’s been acting strange ever since we found you lot. She also said it was a trap.’

‘Maybe then there was something down there that both Townsend and Chris saw. Now up here Njobe’s waiting for it, whatever it is.’

‘But we didn’t bring anything back for her.’

‘I think you must have,’ said Chris. ‘Otherwise, why has the *KayBee 2* left orbit?’

Jason clapped his hands together. ‘Charley Connor had a theory about that. Whatever it was, it was put there to be found.’

‘But why now? Why us?’

Jason shrugged. ‘Hey, I’m playing with the jigsaw pieces, but I don’t have a picture to guide me. As you said, Lloyd, it’s all supposition. I think Chris here is our biggest clue. Whatever he was linked up to down there has done something to his mind.’

Chris didn’t reply and they all looked at him.

‘Is there anyone on this ship called Baygent?’

‘No. Why?’

‘I don’t know. It’s a name I keep thinking of. I thought it might be significant.’

DeJoine considered this. 'Let's get Ghoti to run it through the computer.'

The door opened and Emile rushed in. 'Ghoti thinks we've made a bit of an error. She doesn't think Njobe's reprogrammed your BABE computer. She thinks that the computer was preprogrammed before the trip started.'

They turned to leave en masse, only to find the doorway blocked by Cassius. 'What are you all doing here?'

Emile couldn't stop himself. As usual. 'We're not your enemy. It's your doctor and the computer. There's something going on.'

Chris tried to grab Emile, to shut him up, but it was too late.

Cassius grabbed Emile. 'How do you know this?'

'Ghoti,' he choked. 'She's accessed your computer ter-'

Cassius dropped Emile. 'No! You'll kill Brutus!'

He turned and bounded away.

'C'mon,' yelled Chris. 'He's part of it. With Njobe and BABE! They were talking together!'

The group all ran after Cassius.

'Come on, beautiful computer. Tell me what Njobe is looking for.' Ghoti was carving her way through the electronic information with ease.

Just like the old days, she was slicing into the core's memory, bypassing every conceivable virus, password and code. Occasionally she clapped at her own fortune, grinning like she hadn't grinned in years.

'This is fun. F-U-N!' She tapped furiously. 'C'mon BABE, give me your secrets.'

++BAYGENT APOTHEOSIS++

'What the hell is that BABE?' Ghoti typed.

MORE?

++UNAVAILABLE++

'Think, girl, think. Of course!'

ARDETHE

++JITHII++

'Now what the heck do you suppose a Jithii is, Ghoti?'

And someone broke her neck, her back and smashed her head into the screen of the computer, shredding her skin with glass.

To ensure she was dead, the body was held in place as a few hundred volts coursed through it from the machinery, and was then released.

It lolled back, the skin blistered and smoking.

‘Where’s the cat gone?’ asked Blummer.

‘I don’t know,’ snapped Ryne. ‘I’m trying to work out why the course the pilot’s programmed into the navigation console isn’t what it should be.’

Blummer came and checked. ‘In fact, lad, it’s in totally the opposite direction to Central and the PS.’

‘No, really, Blummer? Like I hadn’t worked that out for myself? It may interest you to know that I’ve been locked out of any override protocols.’

‘Come again?’

‘I, and probably you, no longer have any control over this ship, Blummer.’

Blummer sat heavily in a chair. ‘I knew that cyborg pilots were a bad idea.’ He moved to his own set of flashing lights and switches, but they made no sense to him at all. ‘I don’t like this, Ryne, lad. I’m going to contact the governor.’

Ryne put a hand down on Blummer’s arm. ‘Is that wise? He’s got a bit of a thing about protocol. We don’t want to piss him off, do we?’

‘BABE?’ yelled Blummer. ‘BABE, what’s going on?’

There was no reply.

Ryne activated the communicator. And it exploded in front of him.

‘Great. Now we’re cut off from everyone else.’

Blummer slowly got up. ‘Keen on regulations, lad?’

‘Nope. Never. You?’

‘Not at all. You thinking what I’m thinking?’

‘They could drum us out of the service for this, Blummer. You’re due to retire soon. You could lose your pension if we’re overreacting.’

Blummer sat again. 'But are we?'

Ryne sighed. 'OK, suppose we break cardinal rule numero uno. We walk down to the main part of the ship and go see Tolland. If there is something wrong, he might be pleased that we've told him. We can't get in contact. He might be wondering why we're not going to Central.'

Blummer nodded. 'Good point, lad. Or he could have instructed it. In which case, my pension is a goner. Wiped. Deleted. Zapped.' He looked very downcast. 'And who'll feed Smokey then?'

Ryne shrugged. 'It's got to be your decision, Blummer. You're the boss.'

'Oh thank you, Ryne, lad. Play by the rules when it suits you, eh?'

Ryne sat as well. Neither of them knew what to do.

Smokey the cat had given up chasing mice, rats and moths.

There was something else on the ship. He could sense it. Something... something that cats had to investigate. Part of their duty when looking after their human Feeders.

It was a long way away, though. Down in the forbidden part of the ship. One of the human Feeders had refused him food for a day when he had last ventured down that path.

But these new 'things' needed investigating. Smokey could sense them there, waiting. They were giving it off in waves. Anticipation. And evil.

Smokey's fur rose.

Whatever was now aboard this ship, it was his duty to protect the Feeders from it.

Cassius was just a few paces ahead of the others when he leapt forward into his room.

From behind, Emile could already see that Ghoti was beyond help, but before they got any further, Cassius turned on them.

'Brutus! You fools. You've killed Brutus!' And he shoved them aside again, going back the way they'd come.

Jason let him go, raising a hand to stop the others. 'I think it's too late for Brutus.'

'Oh cruk!'

They all turned to see Townsend staring from the other end of the corridor at them. And at Ghoti's body.

She turned and fled.

'Let her go,' said Lloyd.

Chris was gripping the side of his head.

'Are you OK?' asked DeJoine.

Chris nodded, but his face said exactly the opposite. 'Lights,' he muttered. 'Going off in my head like fireworks. I can feel something there, something familiar about all this.'

'Deja vu?' asked Emile.

'No. No, more like there's something on this ship that I recognize.'

'Me?'

Chris managed a smile. 'No, Jason. Oddly enough, not you. Something deadly, something dangerous.'

Lloyd came out of the office, shaking her head. 'Poor Ghoti. She didn't stand a chance.'

'Who did it? I mean, Emile, Chris and I were with you two. And Hallett and Connor are with Njobe.'

'Townsend?' suggested Emile, and Lloyd shrugged. 'Could be. But I can't see why. And she did rather look as horrified as the rest of us.'

'Yeah, but you said she'd been acting weird since you were on the planet,' DeJoine pointed out. 'Who knows? Maybe it's an act.'

'My money would have been on Cassius if he hadn't been with us.' Lloyd waved a hand back at Ghoti. 'Whoever did that to her was very strong.'

Jason suddenly swore. 'We now know that Njobe and Cassius are up to something. And we've left Hallett and Connor with them.'

'But they're safe, surely,' Emile said. 'I mean, they're in comas.'



‘I don’t think anyone is safe with Njobe.’ DeJoine stared at Ghoti. ‘Five minutes ago, she and I discovered that, and now look at her.’

Laurel Njobe had been a real Daddy’s girl. Daddy and Mummy had worked very hard in the fuel-stack store of their colony. Each day the twelve thousand colonists depended on Mummy and Daddy’s work to keep them heated, fed and comfortable.

Mummy and Daddy never really complained, even though they must have known that the stacks were second-hand when the colony was established. Surely they must have realized that the safety measures and certificates were dubious, if not outright forgeries. But still, for twenty-three years, they had worked hard in the stacks, and, as a reward, they soaked up the cancerous emanations until it began to tell on them.

The colony doctors were most surprised when Daddy fell ill and died within two weeks. They couldn’t explain it. After all, the company that had supplied the stacks was a vast, profitable, system-wide conglomerate. It wouldn’t sell dodgy goods, surely.

Mummy died a year later, ostensibly of the same cancer.

Young Laurel, ending her medical degree on Terrill’s World, returned home embittered and angry.

Her family had been taken from her, and she had the means to pay the conglomerate back.

So she did. She got a job with them, and over four years worked up from lab assistant to chief pharmacist with their medical labs.

Then she sent a coded warning to all the suppliers of foodstuffs. Around six hundred and fifty tonnes of dehydrated soya now contained a mutagenic self-replicating *E.-coli*-based virus. Anyone eating the stuff would die. Simply heating it or adding warm water would cause the viral fungus to spore.

All the conglomerate had to do was publicly accept responsibility and pay recompense to those who had got

cancer from their badly maintained fuel-stack systems. Or their families if they had died.

It all seemed terribly simple, terribly efficient.

Laurel Njobe had forgotten one major factor. The conglomerate did not care. Her virus claimed eighty-one lives before she told them how to counteract its effects.

Then she tried to run, but under the System Administration, criminals did not run far.

She was caught and sentenced immediately. Life at Kamp Kolossus, a huge concrete bunker built on an airless moon of Sirius VII.

Then, after eight years, she met 'the Dragon Man' as the other inmates called him. He was a strange individual – no one knew exactly why he was there, although rumours from rape, murder, drugs addiction through to real crimes such as mind-wiping, genocide and defrauding whole planetary banks littered the rumour-filled corridors of Kamp Kolossus.

Njobe was instantly attracted to the Dragon Man - he had a large fire-breathing dragon tattooed on to his back – and before long they were regular sex partners.

'Do you want to escape?' was the pillow talk of one night.

'Yes,' she replied without hesitating. 'Anything to get me back out there, attacking the corporations and conglomerates which are destroying our lives.'

Which was the kind of driven, compulsive answer he clearly wanted. All she had to do was agree to help his people first. A quick job using the medical skills and her computer skills.

'I don't have anything other than rudimentary computer skills,' she said.

'That is not a problem,' he replied. 'You can learn.'

The breakout was easy - maybe the Dragon Man had fixed it with the guards. In fact the route to the supply ship was so uncomplicated it could easily have been a trap.

And for a brief while, she thought it was. Everything was just too easy. But who would do this to her? And why? Even to the conglomerate she had tried to destroy, she was pretty inconsequential.

The ship had taken off, with Laurel Njobe smuggled aboard. She suffered the g-forces but survived them. She had enough oxygen to keep her going for the three-day trip back to the world of Hoss, where the Dragon Man's associates would meet her.

Everything was fine until the ship exploded in space and Njobe died.

Except she didn't. She awoke from her nightmare somewhere else, somewhere that smelt of antiseptic. Somewhere that was bright and quiet and busy and calming.

And the Dragon Man was with her. Smiling.

'Everything is just fine,' he said. 'We're just making sure you can interact with the computers and with something else. Something very special we need you to communicate with for us.'

And she had begun screaming.

Of course, that was some time ago. Now it all made sense to her. Now it was as the Dragon Man had promised and very soon she would be back at Central, ready to resume her vendetta against the big money-making greedy capitalists of the system.

She was currently standing in the secondary room of her medical area, Charlene Connor's comatose form lying on a gurney beside her.

A cable snaked out from behind her left ear and was attached to a wall socket beneath a small access panel.

Hovering in front of her was the holographic face of

BABE, blowing kisses and winking pointlessly while saying nothing.

Njobe was nodding to herself as she downloaded more of BABE's data. She knew about Ghoti's hacking (surprisingly successful - that ought to have been foreseen and Ghoti killed or transferred elsewhere) and she knew Cassius was on his way.

She also knew that Jason Kane was here to collect Chris Cwej. She now understood everything and the part everyone had to play in it.

And now she even understood why it had been necessary for Grierson to die.

She unclipped the cable from her neck port and it whizzed back into the access panel.

She placed her hands on Connor's forehead, trying to ignore the sight of burn marks on her palms from when she had smashed Ghoti into the terminal.

Cassius dashed in. 'Brutus? Is Brutus all right?'

'You have not kept your side of our bargain,' BABE said quietly. 'You let the women use your terminal. Who knows what they have learnt? Your job was to keep them away from us once these two were in our custody. You have jeopardized the entire mission.'

Cassius rounded on the hologram. 'I did not want any part of this! You have coerced me into being dishonourable. Into betraying everything Brutus and I stood for.'

'You are redundant, Cassius,' said BABE. And suddenly Brutus's life-support systems switched themselves off.

Brutus gave a short cry, and her eyes snapped open.

'Cassius?' she breathed. And died.

Njobe pulled one of the gurneys towards her. 'Eenie meenie minee mo,' she chanted. Njobe lifted the patient's right hand and touched the back of Cassius's hairy neck with it.

Beside her, the comatose woman moaned and stirred.

And although Njobe could not see the internal effect on Cassius, she had a good idea of what was happening. She imagined Cassius's brain being enveloped by a strange alien life form that seeped through his brain, attaching itself to every neuron within, dominating his mind. His will. His personality.

Njobe smiled at BABE. 'With all that has happened, I suspect we need his strength to protect us right now more than we need her.'

She wheeled Connor back and replaced the gurney next to the one on which Hallett lay.

Governor Tolland had spent the last fifteen minutes straightening up the items on his desk after that vile teenager

had knocked everything on to the floor. What a stupid way to make his point. So typical of today's youth. They needed a good boot camp. Conscript them all, have them serve in the Auxies for a while. That'd straighten 'em out.

Where was that Rimananee woman. He needed... well, relaxation. To work some of the stress out. A good massage followed by something a little more physical. Yes.

'Computer, where is my new Missy, eh? Where's Ghoti Rimananee?'

But there was no answer.

This was all getting frighteningly out of hand. One minute he was governing a scavenger ship, admittedly up to his neck in dreadful female convicts, but they had a job to do and so far had been doing it. The holds were already filling up with a good set of bonuses for him.

Now he had a headless corpse, an independently acting computer, no communication with his flight crew and three strange men to deal with.

'It's not right, is it Guppy?'

The fish, obviously, did not answer.

There was a chime at the door and then it opened.

'It is customary to wait until -'

'Stuff it, Tolland,' snapped Townsend. 'We've another problem. Rimananee's dead. Murdered. You must call for help.'

Call for help? What the hell was this blasted stupid woman going on about?

'Military men and governors don't call for help at the first sign of trouble, Townsend. No, we try to sort it out. Call for reinforcements as a last resort, not at the first hurdle. That's what separates humanity from the jumped-up Johnny Natives we help educate. We show them how to stand on their own two feet. Lead by example. Our ways will never lead forward again if we give in with the initial problem.' Good grief, this girlie would never be a leader. At least Lloyd knew how to lead.

'It's like Guppy and Matilda, you see.' He wandered towards the fish. 'Their lives would have been a mixture of hunter and

hunted. They could just give up, wait for the rest of the shoal to protect them. But no. It's in their nature to turn and face the enemy. Watch out for the whites of their eyes and then strike back. Superiority through strength of character as well as strength of ability. That's what gave us power, Townsend. And that's what'll give it back to us now these wars and plagues and factionalists are being ended.'

Tolland turned around to deliver his final word on the matter but the room was empty.

Then the lights dimmed, the bubbles in the fish tank stopped bubbling, and he just knew that his door would again be locked shut.

However, worst of all, in the corner, once again, the power to the safe was off. And this time all the blasters were missing.

Jason dived forward, just as the door to the medical area began to slide shut. It was an instinctive movement - as soon as the corridor lights flickered, he guessed that BABE was shutting down the power again.

Chris was beside him in an instant, standing over him, helping pull the doors back.

'Good... team we make,' he puffed.

'As always, Chris.' Jason grimaced at the strain, but turned his head back. 'Anyone else care to assist?'

Lloyd was there instantly and between the three of them, they wrenched the door open enough.

There was a shorting sound and a flash from the wall where the door slid back.

'I think you broke it,' said Emile.

'No, really? Oh dear.' Jason let the door go and slid back from between Chris's strong legs. The door stayed open.

Lloyd went in straight away, fists balled in case she met resistance. But there was none. The room was empty.

Chris looked in. Strange to think just half an hour or so back, he had been listening to Njobe, Cassius and BABE conspiring. Now he was with these people he had to trust

were his friends, hoping to stop them doing whatever they were doing.

Stopping the Jithii.

‘Jason?’

‘Yeah?’

‘What is a Jithii?’

‘No idea. Why?’

Chris sucked his top lip. ‘Because it’s what Njobe’s trying to find.’

‘How do you know?’ asked DeJoine.

‘It’s here. In my head, somehow. I just, well, know.’

Jason was beside him in an instant. ‘On that planet, you were wired up to something. I wonder if it could be responsible for putting information in your brain.’

‘That might account for the loss of memory,’ Lloyd said. ‘Like a mind-wipe, but only partial.’

‘Mind-wipe?’ Emile had not heard of that.

‘Nasty trick,’ said DeJoine. ‘Once favoured by the harsher Kamps. Originally called the Keller Principle - they’d bury your own personality and memories, retarding you. They could ship you out to some worker colony where you’d spend the rest of your life working away, unaware that you were once a criminal.’

‘Unaware of just about anything, actually. Including your own name, more often than not,’ added Lloyd. ‘It’s outlawed now of course.’

Emile was rummaging through some cupboards. Lloyd asked why and he explained he was looking for some chemicals. ‘If we could make stink bombs or something like that, we might distract them for a while. Enough to rescue Connor and Hallett.’

‘No need, ‘Meel,’ said Jason. He was in the secondary room, where Hallett and Connor were on their gurneys. ‘Just find a stimshot.’

Chris found one beside his old bed. ‘This do?’

Jason administered a small dose to each woman, while DeJoine kept a wary eye out for Njobe or anyone else.

Hallett awoke first, smiling when she saw the others.

But when Connor awoke, she stifled a scream. 'Grierson!' 'She's dead,' said Jason, holding her tightly.

Very tightly, Emile thought. Benny wouldn't like that.

But Connor struggled a bit, almost pushing him away. 'No, you don't understand,' she cried. 'We've got to -'

'Shut up!'

They turned as one, back towards the room they had come in from.

DeJoine was standing there, a blaster aimed at her temple, held by Townsend. Another was in Townsend's belt.

'You're all infected. I saw them. I saw them down there.'

'Saw what, Marianne?' Lloyd took a tentative step forward, but a sudden squirm from DeJoine stopped her. Townsend pressed the blaster muzzle harder against her head.

'You're all against me now. I can see that. But I know the truth, you see.'

'Marianne, whatever happened on the planet has upset you, I can see that. This is the time we should join together. Be a team.'

Townsend nodded, but her eyes were darting everywhere, making sure no one was getting closer. Her other arm, wrapped around DeJoine's throat, squeezed tighter, as she reached up to her own hair, twisting it through her fingers. 'No. No, that's what they want!' she hissed. 'Can't you see that, Siobhan? They want us together, here and now. That's the trap. We had to find him and them.' She was looking at Chris. 'He's the cause of it all.'

'In what way, Marianne?' asked Chris. 'Please tell me what you know. I need to find out the truth.'

Townsend shook her head which, as she was still holding her hair, nearly caused her to throttle DeJoine. She released the girl, shoving her towards Lloyd, and ran her now free hand through her hair again and again.

Emile could see that the hand holding the blaster was shaking.

'I don't know!' Townsend sounded desperate. 'But they're here, that I do know.' Movement distracted her. 'Stay where you are,' she shrieked.



It was Jason, helping Connor off the gurney. The woman was tired and almost dropping to the floor.

'Please, Townsend,' he said. 'Charley needs some medical help. Let me find another stimshot to revive her. She saw what happened to Grierson. Maybe she can help clear this mystery up, eh?'

But Emile could see that wasn't going to convince Townsend. She was too far gone. 'No. No, that's what you want, isn't it? To get me off my guard. Well, Tolland placed me in charge, so this is my show. I say what happens.' She shoved the blaster in their direction again and yelled loudly. 'I say who lives and dies, OK?'

'OK,' said Chris. 'That's fine. We just need to talk. Tell us what you saw, all right?'

Townsend nodded. 'They flew. Black. Riding the air currents. They hadn't got a shape, they were sort of not there. Solid but... but transparent. I tried to follow them, see where they went, but then they'd vanished. All I could see were Grierson and Hallett waiting for me to come back. But I couldn't because I knew they were watching. These... these things were watching me. Waiting. Don't you see it? It's a trap. They wanted us - you - to bring them aboard this ship. To escape. To kill me because I saw them - I knew what they could do. It's me they want, just me!'

Townsend burst into tears, dropping the blaster.

Chris was beside her quickly, hugging her, letting her sob on to his shoulder. 'Hey, it's all right, OK? It's fine.'

Great. Emile decided. Jason gets one girl and psycho Chris gets psycho Townsend.

Lloyd took the opportunity to move past them, subtly kicking the blaster towards Emile, and began hunting through the cupboards, looking for stimulants.

Hallett moved towards Townsend, easing her away from Chris.

'Marianne? It's Jay. Jay Hallett. Are you OK?'

'Jay?'

'Yeah, it's me. Listen Mari, everything's going to be just fine. Trust me, OK?'

‘Jay?’

Hallett placed her hand on Townsend’s forehead. ‘Yeah, just fine.’

And Townsend started screaming unintelligibly, shoving Hallett away. ‘No!’ she screeched. ‘No! No! No!’

Hallett just sat there and sighed quietly. Then her head exploded, showering everyone in blood and tissue.

DeJoine screamed as Townsend stopped.

And Hallett’s headless corpse flopped on to the floor, soaking the white tiles in fresh red blood.

Townsend looked up and smiled, straight at Chris.

And something inside his head flashed white and he remembered almost everything. ‘Oh shit,’ he said quietly. ‘The Jithii. There are two of them.’

## A BIG SURPRISE

Dayl Laratt was getting heartily sick of running around after deans, rectors, professors, doctors and assorted lecturers (guest and otherwise). Just the once he had been in the Snail Mail Room for the entire uni when a crystal arrived for Dr Winston.

Ever eager to improve his history grades, Dayl had rushed over to her rooms with the crystal. Ever eager to increase his already impressive physique, which she had long since realized was where Dayl's true strengths lay, and thus keep him away from her classes, Winston had given him a package to take back to the Snail Room.

Old Jy'mli'n the Pakhar attendant had realized that Dayl was faster and stronger than his own legs and slipped the youth a few shillings every morning as beer money in exchange for delivering anything marked 'urgent'.

As most people using Snail these days were doing so only with urgent packages, it rather meant Dayl was kept very busy, very fit and with no time to spend his beer money.

Today he had just delivered another crystal to the rector of Garland College, a taciturn woman too young to be a real professor and too moody to be a real lecturer. Dayl considered it part of his duties as unofficial post-room boy to make notes of which people he considered good enough for St Oscar's. Professor B. Summerfield certainly failed his every expectation.

'Miserable bitch,' he murmured as he came away from her door, the crystal left outside.

Just because she'd been having a shower (at four in the afternoon?) when he knocked.

'This had better be good,' she had yelled.

‘Just Dayl Laratt, Rector. With another crystal for you. Same POO as the last ones.’

How was he to know that was bad news? Most people wanted to know the Point of Origin of their packages. But the stream of verbal abuse that greeted him from the other side of the door was unnecessary. OK, he could cope with the ‘You’ve dragged me out of the shower just for...’ with little problem. But the words used to describe the sender, what the crystal probably said and where Dayl could, apparently, put it were wholly unnecessary. And unbecoming of a rector. He’d have words with Professor Follett, Summerfield’s head of department.

And he could do with some extra archaeology grades.

Mind you, he decided he’d really like to meet this man who not only upset Summerfield so much but was apparently capable of having sex with himself while simultaneously chewing excrement.

Anyone that could ruffle her *that* much had to be worth meeting.

Be calm, Benny. Stay calm and talk rationally, because shouting and screaming won’t help either of you.

She gently tapped on the door to Irving Braxiatel’s rooms. He would obviously be in - he always was. Bernice assumed he worked sometimes, but every time she’d ever gone looking for him, he’d been there. Reading. Writing. Or, better still, sipping some exotic wine from some unnamed vineyard elsewhere in space. And probably time as well.

‘Come in, Benny,’ he called.

How did he always do *that*, as well?

Pushing open his door, she saw him seated in his high-backed leather armchair, a tumbler of whiskey ready for her, a saucer of milk on the floor under the ornate table.

‘No Wolsey?’ He sipped on his usual sweet white wine.

‘No. He’s taken refuge atop my Professor Nightshade figure. We had a... er... disagreement as to how many layers of Jason’s flesh I was going to remove with a white-hot scalpel.’

Braxiatel nodded, as if this was a conversation about growing vegetables or painting window frames.

‘What has he done this time?’

By way of an answer, Bernice tossed him a crystal. ‘I left my reader in my rooms. In pieces. Joseph will have a hell of a job finding all the components. And the components of the components.’

‘I hear rumours that some of the porters are going on strike. I suspect Joseph is the ringleader. You might like to try to make life easier for him.’

She gave him a look that clearly said Joseph’s artificial feelings were not uppermost in her mind and the subject should be swiftly dropped.

As a result he tugged his own datapad out of a drawer and slotted the crystal into it.

A full-size Jason shimmered into focus.

‘Hi, Benny. I hope this gets to you about a day after I’ve zoomed in and back out of your exciting existence in university-land.

‘If it does, then I’m probably out of thumping range, which’ll be just as well, as I’ll have stolen something that you probably didn’t know I knew you knew existed.

‘If you get my drift.

‘No doubt, you know all about the recent discovery of Ardethe. Or whatever. And the disappearance of the AMS team sent there. And no doubt you’ll be planning your own trek, especially if that fool Braxiatel has anything to do with it. God, he’s a pain in the arse, always convincing you to do stupid things.

‘Anyway, as the champion of doing stupid things, I feel I’ve got involved with some people I probably shouldn’t have. Trouble is, I don’t know exactly who they are. In fact, I wouldn’t have bothered if they hadn’t said two words to me.

‘But more of that later.

‘They’ve asked me to investigate something called the Baygent Apotheosis and told me that you’d been given the details of where to find it. Whatever it is. All I knew was that

it had something to do with this new planet near the supposed Ardethe site.

‘Benny, I really think it’s going to be dangerous. That’s why I couldn’t tell you about it until now - I had to stop you from coming and if I’d *told* you why you wanted that information, you’d have been packing your trowel before I’d finished speaking. And, yes, I know you think you can face any kind of danger but the people behind all this are, I think, very dangerous players. God knows if I’m going to get out of it.

‘And the reason I’m going, apart from a hefty cash reward, of course - I’d hate you to think I’d changed my ways that much - is that the person they say who is on this planet and who can help me find this Baygent Apotheosis (whatever that is) is an old friend of yours. And mine - a rarity indeed.

‘Chris Cwej.’

The hologram vanished, leaving Bernice gazing at Braxiatel.

‘Did you know anything about this?’

Braxiatel shook his head. ‘But we know who Baygent is. Or rather, was.’

‘Yeah, the man who set up the Knights of Jeneve. The leader whose descendant they believe will one day return to lead them to victory. Why do I suspect that this Baygent Apotheosis is some kind of weapon?’

Braxiatel shook his head and drained his wineglass.

‘We know what the Baygent Apotheosis is, actually. It’s listed in many of the texts.’ He got up and rummaged through some books on his shelves, finally pulling out a big, blue, leather-bound book.

‘I love books,’ he said. ‘So much better than discs, crystals and all the other soulless devices we have to read today.’

‘Yes, Irving, I know. And they last longer and smell nicer and have better-resolution pictures and can I please know what my stupid ex-husband is about to die for? Or, knowing the Knights, is already dead because of?’

Braxiatel gave Bernice the book, opened at the right page, and she started reading.

‘Oh, my God,’ she said almost instantly.

When she finished, she closed the book slowly, a shade whiter than before. 'Can they do it?'

Braxiatel nodded. 'I imagine so. If Baygent's people set it in motion three hundred odd years ago, I see no reason why it shouldn't still be running now.'

Bernice sighed. 'We ought to try to find them.'

'You yourself said we could cause more trouble by doing just that. I think we should wait a while. Oh, and Benny, who is Chris Cwej?'

'An old friend. You met him. At my wedding.'

'Which I haven't been to yet, I know. I'm rather looking forward to that.'

'Yeah, well, when you get there, tell my younger self not to marry Jason. Life would be so much easier then.' She relaxed in the chair. 'I suppose we can do nothing except sit and wait to hear from, or about, Jason now.'

Braxiatel concurred.

'Chris Cwej, eh?' murmured Bernice. 'Now that would be a welcome sight.'

## BEAT THE CLOCK

‘Run!’

It was a fairly reasonable response to having a second headless corpse at your feet, spraying blood and other ooze at you, yet Emile was still surprised that the rest of his friends agreed.

Chris in fact led the way, with Lloyd almost dragging the staggering Connor after her. Jason was right on their heels (naturally) while Emile and DeJoine brought up the rear, Emile throwing back a final look at Townsend, kneeling in the blood, her green suit soaking it up.

She hadn’t moved since Hallett had died and it crossed Emile’s mind that for all her antisocial personality, they had rather abandoned Townsend to her fate.

‘It’s too late for her,’ DeJoine insisted, yanking Emile back into reality. ‘Chris says we should try to get to Tolland’s office.’

‘He’ll have guns, presumably,’ Chris called back.

Lloyd stopped running, and the others almost careered into her.

‘It’s OK,’ Jason noted. ‘No one seems to be following us. Yet.’

‘Chris, you do say the most stupid things sometimes. This is a scavenger ship. We’re all convicts. Do you seriously think there would be guns on board?’ Lloyd smiled. ‘Ever the optimist.’

‘Townsend had a gun. Or two,’ put in Emile.

‘The blasters from the planet, remember,’ Lloyd replied. ‘Emile, I take it you picked up the one I kicked to you?’



Emile tried to put on a brave face as the memory of her doing exactly that flooded back. All he could say was 'Whoops.'

Jason gave a resigned sigh. 'You are the worst partner I've ever had. Sometimes. Anyway... wouldn't Tolland have one - being ex-colonial and all that?'

A look passed between Lloyd and DeJoine, then DeJoine added, 'He really had you fooled, didn't he? Remember I said we're all criminals? Well Tolland's no different. Now the Administration are closing down the frontier stations and expanding into the colonization programme, people with careers like his are finished. And an ex-colonel with a native-subjugation record like his just an embarrassment the Administration can live without. They're treated like war criminals. After the massacre on Sha 4 he instigated, they stuck him out here out of harm's way. No, he hasn't a gun, either.'

They continued moving, Jason taking charge of Connor. 'Look,' he said, 'we'll catch you up. Charley's in no fit state to run.'

Lloyd stared at Jason hard. 'If anything happens to her...'

'It won't.'

Emile almost recoiled at the strength of Jason's answer. And he believed that Jason really would take every precaution with Charley. Would he have done the same if it was Benny? Did he let her get into trouble too often? Didn't he make sure she was safe and was that why they split? Because Jason didn't care enough about her?

'Quit daydreaming, 'Meel, and get after the others.'

Emile realized Chris had led Lloyd and DeJoine on. 'Will you be... ?'

Jason grinned, reassuringly. 'Hey, we'll be fine. Go on, partner. Keep an eye on Chris. I don't think he's as well as he's pretending.'

Emile nodded. 'Jason. Are we going to get home?'

Jason's eyes lit up in a way Emile hadn't seen since they had first crashed on the blue planet. He was enjoying all this. 'Yeah, 'Meel, I'll get you home. That's a promise.'

'You live for this, don't you? Excitement, danger, the challenge. You love it all.'

Jason shrugged. 'I guess. But I don't go looking for it willy-nilly, you know. It just kind of happens to me.'

'Yeah. Right.' Emile suddenly grabbed Jason's hand and shook it. 'I don't share your confidence, Mr Kane. This is just in case anything happens to either of us. Or both. I want to say "thanks". For bringing me.'

'Meel, I've got to get you back in one piece. Can you imagine what our friendly professor of archaeology would do to me if you went home in a three-by-six crate?'

'The same as she'd do to me if it was you in that crate and not me.' Emile managed a smile. 'See you later, partner.'

Chris was getting more flashes to his past. More pieces of the jigsaw were falling into place about his life. And why he was here. Dragons. It was all about dragons. And this Baygent person.

And Roz. Who was Roz? Jason had mentioned her. Or maybe it was a him. No, Roz was a her. He knew that somehow. So why wasn't she here with him? That felt... wrong.

'Here we are, boys and girls,' Lloyd said as they reached the locked door to Tolland's office.

DeJoine tried the chime but it was dead. 'Computer must be out,' she said, and started thumping on the door. 'Tolland! Tolland! Open this door!'

Emile panted up behind them. 'What's the problem?'

DeJoine kicked the door. 'The old fool won't open the door. It's jammed.'

'Or computer-locked.' said Chris. 'BABE's locked us out and him in. He's irrelevant to the plan.'

'Plan? What plan?'

Chris had surprised himself. 'I... I haven't a clue. I don't think I have anyway.' He rubbed his face. 'This is getting bloody frustrating.'

'Tell me about it.' Lloyd joined in thumping on the door.

A voice came from inside. 'Stop it! It won't work. The computer lock's broken. The system's off.'

Lloyd stopped kicking. 'Tolland! Tolland! It's Lloyd. Njobe's the killer, Governor. We're trapped out here and we need to get into your office for safety!' There was no reply. 'She's not going to spare you, dammit! Tolland!'

DeJoine added her penn'orth. 'Tolland! Tolland, you bastard! Open this frigging door!'

'Hang on. It's opening. Chris watched as, inch by inch, the door started to pull open, until the women added their strength and it started to slide back faster.

'We need it to shut again,' Chris said. 'Don't fuse it like I did the medical one!'

Nodding, Lloyd pushed DeJoine and Emile through the small gap. 'You next,' she breathed.

'No, you,' said Chris and he shoved her in.

The door started to shoot back, but Chris grabbed it just in time. He could see two more pairs of fingers grab it from the other side and slowly it inched open again and he was able to force his way through, hearing a satisfying thud as it closed behind him.

Tolland was sat at his desk, nursing sore fingers from his initial attempt at opening the door. 'I object to this,' he muttered. 'It's not appropriate for you to use the governor's office as a hideaway from whoever is chasing you. Stupid games and pranks are -'

Lloyd smashed her fists on to the desk in front of him, making him jump a noticeable few inches away. 'Tolland - we're here to talk about far more important things than your former glory. There's something alien out there. It's killed Grierson and Hallett, possibly Townsend. Njobe and the computer are up to their tits in it and I'm not sure if Cassius is on our side or not. Oh, and Brutus is dead. I think that's everything. Now, what do you think?'

Tolland stood up, adjusting his tie, and ran a hand through what little hair he had. He was trying to look calm and efficient. He was trying to save dignity in the face of adversity.

Emile didn't know whether to laugh at him or sympathize with him.

'I think, Lloyd, that you are a waste of space and time. Just because I replaced you with Townsend -'

'She's got nothing to do with this! Oh, for God's sake, get out of cloud-cuckoo-land and think! We've a killer or four on board and all you're doing is blabbering on and -'

Tolland waved a finger warningly. 'I've warned you before about your attitude, Lloyd!'

Chris stepped forward. 'She won't have an attitude for you to dislike if you don't listen to her. And if she has, maybe you'll soon be too dead to listen.'

'Who the ruddy hell are you?'

'Governor Tolland, my name is Chris Cwej. I think I've been used by these creatures - I think they're called Jithii - to bring them aboard.'

Before Chris could continue, there was a thumping on the door.

'Oh, my God, they've come for me!' wailed Tolland. 'Lloyd, do something!'

DeJoine and Emile tried to ply the door back and it moved just a fraction. Another two sets of fingers joined in and Emile was glad his hunch was right. It was Jason and Connor. They almost fell into the room, Connor looking a lot more awake than before.

'Sorry we took so long,' Jason said breathlessly. 'Cassius is out there. On the warpath.'

Tolland had regained what little composure he had. 'Who said you could burst in here, Kane? I mean, you may not actually be one of my prisoners but you can't just

'Belt up, Tolland!' snapped Lloyd. 'What do you mean, Cassius is out there?'

'Just that. He must have spotted us and followed us to this room.'

As if to underline this, a massive paw-print indentation, accompanied by a loud thump and a growl, became a new feature of the door.

‘My office is being invaded by mad women, pirates and Grutchas! Will you all please go away! Guppy and Matilda don’t like loud noises.’

‘He’s lost it,’ muttered Emile to Jason.

Another growl, further away, suggested Cassius had given up. For a while at least. ‘He’ll be back,’ DeJoine said gloomily.

Jason took charge. ‘Mr Tolland. The original instruction to go to that planet, where was it sent from?’

‘System Administration Central, of course. The Prison Service department.’

Jason snatched Tolland’s datapad off his desk and began punching buttons. Tolland started to protest, but a filthy look from Lloyd silenced him.

He nodded at the readout. ‘Your last orders and therefore I guess your original orders came from coordinate reference eight-two, Sector eight.’

‘And that, Kane, is where you’ll find SAC.’

Jason shook his head. Still working. ‘Oh, I doubt it, Tolland.’ He smiled. ‘Oh, look. SAC. Coordinate reference six-seven, Sector three.’

Tolland was astonished. ‘So what’s at reference eight... whatever it was?’

Jason tried something else, then smiled. ‘The blue planet. It’s where we all met for the first time. Your orders to come here came from that planet in the first place, routed through BABE.’

‘Stupid ruddy computer! Why didn’t it tell me?’

‘Because it’s part of whatever’s going on here,’ said Chris. ‘Now I know where I recognized the voice from! I heard it on the planet. Does its holographic face resemble a blonde woman?’

‘Marilyn Monroe, a film star, actually,’ said Emile. ‘She was really popular a few hundred years ago. She was murdered because *she* was shagging some Earth president or something.’

‘Why am I not surprised you knew that?’ Jason was still using the datapad for information.

Tolland snatched it away. "That is Administration property. Kindly *do* not abuse it.'

Jason sighed deeply. 'I am using it to try to save our lives, Governor. If you don't mind?' He held out his hand, but Tolland shoved the pad in his drawer.

'No.' He looked at Chris. 'You seem to know an awful lot about all this, Mr Cwej. I thought you'd lost your memory.'

Chris nodded. 'I had.' He sat on the edge of Tolland's desk, trying to ignore the outraged look he got from the governor. 'But it's starting to come back. These Jithii, they're artificial life forms. They've been programmed to do something, look for something.' He tapped his own head. 'It's locked in here, everything we need. I just can't bloody access it.'

'Well, things have been coming back slowly,' said Emile. 'Maybe the rest will.'

'Yeah, and while we wait for Chris to break through whatever conditioning that planet, or these Jithii things, gave him, we sit here and die. I think not.' Jason looked at Lloyd. 'You're the boss. What d'you see as our options?'

Lloyd regarded him quizzically. 'Oh, I'm leader am I? Thanks.'

'Actually,' put in Tolland, 'Townsend is leader. I appointed-'

'Belt up, Tolland,' said at least three people. Emile knew one was Lloyd but wasn't too sure about the others.

'So, these things enter our bodies, via the nervous system,' Chris said suddenly. 'They're gaseous but then solidify once attached to the cerebellum. They then feed off the brain, absorbing the personality entirely, controlling the host. Like parasites.'

DeJoine started to say something, but Jason stopped her quietly.

'Don't. You'll break his concentration.'

'They learn everything about the host, effectively become them. Then, when they've finished, they move on to another.'

Lloyd nodded. 'So they got into Hallett and Grierson. Poor Jeni. Then, once they were finished with them, they moved on to someone else.'

Connor gasped. 'It was in me - I know that now. Goddess, it's like someone just switched my memory back on. Hallett was crushing Grierson's head with her hands. I tried to stop, but when I touched Jeni... everything went blank, and I woke up with you lot. But no... there was something. There was!'

'Easy, Charley. Take it slowly.' Jason threw a look to Chris, who smiled back that he was fine. His memory was returning.

'But it left me - I was temporary. It needed strength.'

'And went into Cassius,' finished Chris. 'Yes, it would do.' He looked up brightly. 'Jason, they are living creatures. The whole area under that planet was habitable, wasn't it?'

'Well, yes.'

'And nothing seemed to affect the Jithii when they got into Hallett and Grierson.'

'I see what you're trying to get at, Chris, really I do.'

'Well I don't,' said Emile.

'Chris is wondering if they need oxygen to breathe like us,' put in Lloyd. 'Can we space them?'

'You'd be certainly killing Townsend and Cassius,' said Chris. 'I'm not sure we can go along with that.'

'Hey, if it's them or me, I'm afraid I side with survival every time.' Connor looked around at the others. 'Oh, c'mon!'

'Charley, that's a big risk. The Jithii was inside you but you survived.' Jason tried to look sympathetic. 'I mean, you wouldn't like it if you were spaced the moment we thought you were infected.'

'Hey, firstly you didn't know I was. Secondly, I was comatose rather than trying to put my paw through a reinforced steel door and thirdly... I... I don't have a thirdly.'

Lloyd tried to make light of it. 'Well, I've always threatened to space Townsend. Here's my chance!'

'So, it's just revenge is it?' Tolland clearly thought he'd been quiet too long.

'Oh, no,' replied Lloyd. 'No, Governor. I'm thinking carefully. For all my dislike of her, I'm not really that keen to kill her. It's a tough decision. Of course, it'd be easier if it was you infected.'

‘Why?’

‘I’d space you without a second’s thought!’

‘Right, that’s it. This is my office. You can all leave. Go on.’

‘If we go out there, Governor,’ said Emile reasonably, ‘we’ll die. This is the only room big enough for all of us with a door a Grutchka can’t get through.’

Tolland reached into his drawer, and Emile assumed he was going to give Jason back the datapad. To be reasonable. To be responsible for those under the protection of his command.

Instead, Tolland produced a third blaster, Jason’s – which he had been forced to hand over when they had arrived - now repowered. ‘You will leave my office. I shall send a distress signal to Central and they will send a rescue ship.’

‘Bearing in mind you don’t even know where Central is, Governor, you’ll forgive us if we don’t hold out much hope.’ Jason waved the others back towards the door but stood his ground.

Tolland threatened him directly with the blaster. ‘You have been a constant source of irritation since you arrived, Kane. I’ve got through many successful years of colonial management, dealing with subversive elements like you. But Oliver Tolland understands his duty. Understands what it means to take charge. I shall ask the computer to send the message.’

‘But BABE is non-operational, Tolland,’ Lloyd reminded him. ‘Hell, it’s probably behind all this.’

‘I know my job, Lloyd. I understand my place in life. I lead. You follow. Simple, really.’

‘Was it that simple for Ghoti?’ shouted Emile. ‘I saw the marks on her neck! You forced yourself on her, didn’t you? Used her. What kind of duty is that?’

‘Emile, I don’t think that’s going to help,’ hissed Chris.

But Tolland was smiling. ‘Each has his place, boy. Rimananee was mine, simple as that. Inferior species, survival of the fittest.’



'In what way was Ghoti inferior, Tolland?' Emile was seeing red. 'Because of the colour of her skin? Her gender? Her social standing? What makes you better?'

'This does.' Tolland aimed the gun straight at Emile. 'I didn't get where I am today by listening to politically correct upstarts like you, boy. Hard graft, strong work. A sense of humour. Of knowing one's place. And now my place is behind this desk, and yours is out there.'

'Dying?'

'If need be. As I said, survival of the fittest.'

Jason and Lloyd wrenched open the door, and one by one they slipped out.

Emile made sure he was the last. 'The Goddess knows, Tolland, I'm not perfect. I make mistakes, I've hurt and offended people. But at least I can say my existence so far - and hopefully for the rest of my life - will never be as twisted and futile and as pathetically wasted as yours.'

He waited to see if Tolland shot him, but the older man did not. Instead he just raised one eyebrow. 'If you were one of my lot, boy, I'd shoot you dead for backchatting me. But when we get back to Central, if you have been shot by me, goodness only knows what further trumped-up charges they'll lay at my door. Get out, boy. You wouldn't last five minutes on the frontier. Where there's real work to be done by real men.' He gave Emile a look of dismissal and then turned to his fish. 'There, there my darlings. Did the shouting get too much? Poor you.'

Emile lost it and yelled louder. 'Call yourself a governor? We've a killer brain-eater on board, some of us are dead and all you want to do is talk to your wretched fish! Do you sense a problem with your priorities, Mr Tolland, or are you just bloody stupid?'

Tolland turned back to look at Emile, slowly. 'I know my priorities, boy. To my service. To my people. I do as I see fit. Remember that.'

With a curse, Emile heaved through the door, and Jason let it go.

Emile's heart was pounding, and he was trembling quite a bit. He wanted to cry but, again, not in front of Jason,

'Next time I'm being threatened by a madman with a gun, remind me to drag you up in front of him. Then you can talk us out of it.'

Emile let out a deep breath. 'I've bugged a lot of this up, | haven't I, Jase? I mean I forget to pick up guns, I open my mouth without thinking. I... well, I'm sorry.'

Jason smiled. 'You're you, 'Meel. I learnt to accept that when we took off from Dellah. You should try doing the same.'

He indicated down the corridor, where Chris and the women were waiting. 'Let's go, partner.'

Njobe was staring at a monitor screen. Flashing up were head-and-shoulder shots of a variety of people. Over two hundred and fifty were in the database, according to the counter in the corner

'And a perfect match still hasn't been found?'

In the corner, Townsend stood, vacantly staring. BABE shimmered beside her.

'Negative,' said the computer. 'Over three hundred years, many subjects have been traced. A number of these have been actually tested.'

A picture of Chris Cwej appeared. 'There's our boy,' Njobe said. 'Is he the one?'

'The DNA is close but not perfect. However, regardless of that, it was right to capture him and implant the knowledge in his mind. Even if he is not the one, he carries the secrets within him. He can control the Jithii.'

'You might have told me there were two of them. I thought Grierson was the only carrier. We are supposed to be working together.'

BABE said nothing, so Njobe prompted it. 'BABE?'

'Governor Tolland is attempting to send a distress call to the Prison Service at Central.'

'Can you block it?'

‘Probably. However, it is an unnecessary risk to leave the possibility there that he could be successful.’

‘I’d be amazed if he knew how to operate a transmitter, let alone the frequency for Central.’ Njobe smiled, and then looked over to Townsend. ‘Go and make yourself useful, Marianne.’

‘I have unlocked his office door,’ BABE announced.

Silently, Townsend left the medical area, leaving both her blasters behind.

Njobe returned to the screen, and the image of Chris Cwej. ‘The Baygent Apotheosis. Excellent.’

‘We need to access BABE’s core,’ said DeJoine. ‘Erase the program completely.’

‘Yeah, bet it’ll let us do that with no problems.’ Jason grimaced, but then nodded. ‘Nevertheless, it’s worth a try.’

Connor grabbed his arm. ‘I can do it easily. We just need a major port.’

‘What’s on offer?’

‘Tolland’s office. The pilot’s module. Or Njobe’s medical area.’

Jason sighed. ‘Great. We have either a long walk with little time, or we face Dr Crippen in her lair or Wild Bill Hickok in his.’ He put a hand on Connor’s shoulder. ‘You decide.’

‘Cheers. You’re right about the walk. And Njobe is an uncertain variable. At least we know Tolland’s potty. Maybe we can play on that.’

‘You can’t be serious, Jase!’ Emile was horrified. ‘I mean, you heard what he said to me. You can’t just turn around and ask to be let back in and dismantle BABE. He’ll go nuts.’

‘Option Four is?’

Emile couldn’t think of one. DeJoine grabbed the boy’s shoulder, pulling him back slightly. ‘Let Jason and Charley do that. You and me, we’ll take the long way round and head for the pilot’s module. See if there’s anything we can do there.’

Unseen by Emile, Jason mouthed a thank-you at DeJoine.

Chris looked at Lloyd. 'Looks like we get to visit Dr Crippen - whoever she is.'

Oliver Tolland stared at the datapad before him. He inserted another chip, and this time the hologram was of him on military service during the great wars of '53. There he was, working for Spinward, fresh out of military college on Io, preparing for life in another system.

He changed crystals, this one showing him as a colonial manager in a rainforest. Beside him, a group of local Johnnies watched as he stood over the dead Braggaht which he had bagged. How magnificent the head had looked above his desk on the plantation. Of course, ruddy Johnny Native claimed the Braggaht was some kind of sacred beast, but Johnny Native, given his way, would claim every blasted animal, tree and insect was sacred in some way. Had to get them out of that sort of mumbo-jumbo.

Another crystal, another colony. Then another and another. And even a couple of that witch, Maureen. Her inexplicable rejection of him had driven him here. Yes, it was all her fault.

And now look at him. Governor of a squalid little scavenger ship, as much a prisoner as the blasted women. Some of whom were dead including, thankfully, that ungrateful Rimananee Missy. The fat boy could never make any of those charges stick.

Stupid boy.

Stupid prisoners.

The door slid open and it took him a moment to remember it wasn't supposed to. The dent made by Cassius quickly reminded him of that.

So did Townsend, standing there, glaring at him.

'Lloyd's trying to assert herself over you, Townsend. I gave you every chance, you know. Every opportunity. But they said you'd gone to work for the enemy. Is that so?'

Townsend said nothing. Just stood there, watching.

'Can't abide that, you know. Treachery. Basest thing, you know, very low.' He moved away from his seat and desk and towards the fish tank. The blaster was resting there, beside

it. Another few paces and he could hold Townsend off if she tried anything.

‘So, tell me, girl. Which is it? You working for me or the killers? I mean, sorry about Rimananee and... and... whatever the other ones’ names are. Were!’

Townsend took one step forward.

Tolland brought up the blaster. ‘Another movement, Townsend, and I’ll fire. I will, you watch me. Can’t have discipline going to pot, you know. You have to understand that what I do, I do out of altruism. Out of ensuring the common good.’

Townsend smiled and stepped closer.

And Tolland aimed at her head and fired.

But nothing happened.

Of course! He’d taken the chargers out when Lloyd had first presented them to him.

The ones Townsend had stolen earlier were useless.

And so was the one in his hand.

Damned silly thing to do, really. Should have been prepared. Should have ruddy well kept one step ahead of the enemy.

Should never have let Maureen walk out on him. It was all her fault, really.

‘The door’s open!’

Jason shrugged. ‘Either Tolland is suddenly super-strong or BABE let him out.’

‘Or someone else in.’

Jason looked at Connor. ‘Thanks for that, Charley. Remind me to say something encouraging to you someday.’

‘You can. Right now.’

‘What?’

Connor whispered in Jason’s ear what she wanted.

Thirty seconds later, Jason was staring at the open doorway, but his mind was elsewhere.

‘Well, OK, I suppose. How long for?’

‘Six months. It’ll be long enough for me to get out of the Administration, to another system. It’ll provide me with

enough documentation to make the journey so much easier.’ Connor pointed at the door. ‘Shall we go in and see what Tolland has to say?’

‘Ready when you are, ma’am.’

They sprinted down the rest of the corridor and into Tolland’s office, both diving in different directions, in case he tried shooting them.

Jason counted to five and lifted his head, and saw Tolland staring at him, mouth open, eyes wide apart in surprise.

And Guppy and Matilda swimming around his submerged head. Guppy actually nipped into the gaping mouth but quickly came back out again.

‘Who the hell dumped him in there?’

‘Who knows, but he certainly didn’t go in voluntarily.’ Connor was on her knees in front of the tank, whose glass was cracked and in danger of shattering, sending water and fish, as well as Tolland’s body, on to the floor. ‘There’s a lot of water here. He tried to fight.’

Jason could see red weals around his neck, where it had been held under the surface. Human-sized marks, rather than paws and claws.

‘These Jithii seemed to have done our Marianne the power of good. She’ll never need steroids again!’

Connor moved to Tolland’s desk, and started pulling away some access panels. ‘Here, Jason! Access Point two, it says. Welcome to BABE’s brain. Handy, in case Tolland needed to bugger it up.’

‘So why didn’t he?’

‘What? Tolland damage service property? Far too frightened of what Central would do to him.’

‘I take it you know what you’re doing, Charley.’

‘Yeah, why?’

‘Because I haven’t a clue. I’ll leave you to it if that’s all right.’ He scanned the room for Tolland’s blaster, but there was no sign. Townsend had probably added it to her collection. He also noted that she had been going through his safe, drawers and paperwork, looking for something, no doubt.

‘Who the hell are you, lad?’

Emile looked at the overweight man before him, wearing an ill-fitting uniform and eclipsing a thinner, much younger man, similarly dressed, who was trying not to be too easily noticed behind.

‘Emile Mars-Smith. Are you the pilot?’

‘Gracious no, lad. He’s a cyborg. I am Stan Blummer, the co-pilot.’ He described himself in such a way that suggested being the co-pilot was far better.

‘And I’m Lucien Ryne. Navigator.’

‘I’m a guest and this is Lisa DeJoine. She’s one of your prisoners.’

A look passed between the two company men, then they smiled. ‘Been a revolution has there?’

Emile and DeJoine filled the two men in, noting with some satisfaction the horror on their faces as the story continued.

‘Cassius and Brutus gone, eh? Well, bad luck on them, eh, lad?’

‘Oh, aye, Blummer. Never liked Grutchas much. Reminded me of my old mam’s poodle, Rathbone. Never liked that either. Always scratching for fleas.’ Ryne offered his hand to Emile and DeJoine. ‘Well, if there’s a revolt going on, *vive la revolution*.’

‘You what?’ Blummer frowned, not comprehending.

‘Something my old mam always said, Blummer. I don’t know what it means either.’

‘By the way, Emile, lad, you seen a grey one-eyed cat in this here vicinity?’

Ryne nodded. ‘Yeah. He’s got a red eyepatch on. Looks dead cool.’

Emile sighed. These two were going to be hard work.

Njobe was watching complex DNA structures float around her in a holographic array.

‘The one to the left is Baygent’s DNA, the one on the right is the DNA for an accountant on Locus Alphae called Del Ravella. It is a ninety-two-per-cent match. Ravella’s currently

being traced by the Knights.' BABE's face was weaving in and out of the DNA images. Njobe flicked a switch and Ravella's DNA vanished and was replaced by another.

'This is the DNA of a loader at the Caspian shipyards, Mark Tarrant. His is only an eighty-eight-per-cent match.'

'How long have the Knights been searching for the correct DNA?'

'Three hundred years,' said a voice from the doorway.

Njobe swung around, smiling. 'Christopher. Good to see you back. Oh hello, Siobhan, come to see what's going on?'

'Is he right?' asked Lloyd. 'Have these Knight people been looking for something for three hundred years?'

'Ask him, Lloyd, not me. I'm just a humble assistant.'

Chris walked across the room, staring at the DNA. 'It's all come back to me now. The information was placed into me on the planet, as a safe guard while the Jithii were released.'

'That's right. The Jithii are programmed to trace the receptacle for Baygent's DNA.'

'Could one of you fill me in on who this Baygent character is, please?' Lloyd shrugged. 'Hey, I've not had my head filled with images and info.'

BABE hovered in front of her but, before it could speak, Chris nodded. 'I recognize you. You were on the planet. Monitoring me.'

'That was my purpose. The Knights of Jeneve programmed me to ensure your safety.'

'How long was I down there?'

Since the previous host died. The Jithii weren't ready then - it was an accident. Your DNA was a close match, so they found you and put you into the casket, uploading the information into your mind.'

'And wiping the real Chris Cwej's memories out,' said Lloyd. 'That's evil.'

BABE looked back at her. 'Baygent's death necessitated these acts. He secretly established a set of databases that would eventually be filled with all knowledge - scientific, cultural, literary, artistic... everything that he considered represented the best of humanity. He entrusted its



completion and protection to the Knights of Jeneve. They have maintained a DNA sample taken from Baygent, which he had himself passed on to both his son and an unknown heir, who would grow up separately, and spread the DNA through their progeny until one day a true Baygent could again be made President of Earth, and whatever empire it may or may not have, supported by the Knights.'

'Yes, that's the one-sided view,' muttered Chris, 'but of course my brain absorbed the rest. Over the centuries, the Knights have detoured from that original noble, if rather flawed and romantic, ideal. Now, they exist as a tiny secret service. Rather than preserving knowledge for the general good, they've become more interested in suppressing it to keep the colonies and corporations weak. This knowledge will be used as a weapon by the Knights as and when they're ready to put their new Baygent in authority. If they find him.'

'And they think you carry this DNA?' Lloyd was trying to take this in.

'Him and two hundred and forty-nine others so far.' Njobe laughed. 'So you see, he's rather precious to us.'

Chris looked at Njobe. 'And what is your role in all this?'

'The Knights need someone to control the Jithii. Their task is to search out the hosts. They were genetically engineered for this task, over the last few centuries. Boiling in vats. Or at least simmering, you might say, over all that time. Now they are ready. Of course, they will need to propagate, to spread out. Hence, they take over their victims, and when those hosts breed, they pass on their own seed, thus the newborn already has a Jithii inside it, searching for the new Baygent.'

'What was wrong with Hallett and Grierson? And, for that matter, what was wrong with me?'

BABE swerved over to him. 'They could not use you - you carrying ninety-four per cent of the potential Baygent DNA. Their task would be to find you, if you weren't already there. The Knights placed you there because you were the nearest match they had found, and with the knowledge implanted into your head, had you turned out to be Baygent's heir, you would have every bit of knowledge necessary to continue

their work. Grierson was too young, unlikely to mate for another few years, but was the easiest to enter on the planet. Likewise Hallett, although the Jithii discovered an incurable cancerous genetic disorder in her. She would have died within two years. Townsend is a better host.'

'And am I Baygent's heir?'

'Are you hell,' laughed Njobe. 'No, your DNA, which had been... what did you call it, beppled? Yeah, well whatever. And you have limited developed psi powers as well, which Baygent never had even a hint of. It was that which confused the Knights back then. BABE and I have informed the Knights of today that you are expendable. That was my second task – to remove that knowledge from you if you were not required.'

Lloyd walked around the DNA holograms. 'But that'll mean wiping your own memories and personality.'

'Not at all. Didn't your little spies tell you what they learnt from BABE's databanks in Cassius's room?' Njobe suddenly tugged hard at her left ear, ripping a large portion of her face off and revealing gleaming metal underneath, a red eye glowing fiercely. 'I am a cyborg, linked to BABE, to the pilot and to the Knights of Jeneve's own databases. What little of Laurel Njobe still exists is kept functioning by circuitry, tubes and plastic organs.' She smiled. 'I'm not entirely sure if there's anything left of Laurel Njobe actually. And I certainly know I don't give a damn.'

'Why don't you host the Jithii then?' Chris was trying to catch Lloyd's eye.

'They need living beings to inhabit. Like all parasites, although they pass into their new bodies gaseously, they do solidify around the brain. Like having someone build an annexe on your brain. Both coexisting, basically unaware of each other until something triggers the Jithii, and wham, the host will go to all sorts of ends to solve the Baygent Apotheosis.'

'Thank you,' said Chris quietly. 'That's what I wanted to know.' He lunged for Lloyd, dragging her to the floor as Townsend wandered in, aiming her blasters at them. One

bolt of energy blew apart a computer console, causing the DNA holos to vanish. The other scorched the wall where Lloyd had been standing.

‘Don’t kill the man,’ Njobe yelled, her fake skin flopping from her chin. ‘I need the information in his mind.’

Chris kicked out, catching Townsend at the back of her knees. She dropped, startled, like a stone, and Lloyd yanked a blaster from her grip, letting off a shot at Njobe.

The astonished doctor recoiled from the blast, staggering back, so Lloyd fired twice more.

A shower of sparks erupted from Njobe’s chest and, with a terrified shriek, she crashed into her medical equipment, twitching.

Townsend was getting back up, until Chris thumped her with a medical datapad and she dropped, out cold.

‘Kill her,’ snarled Lloyd. ‘It’ll kill the Jithii.’

Chris aimed the blaster at Townsend.

He aimed.

Roz.

It came back in a massive wave of nostalgia, guilt and fear. But, above it all, sadness. Roz had been his friend, his partner. Adjudicators together.

And she had been killed on Valhalla, taken from him.

Townsend, suddenly awake, lashed out with her legs, twisting around Chris’s ankles, toppling him away. She scrambled up, swiping one of the blasters, and fled from the room.

Lloyd glared at Chris. ‘Why the hell didn’t you kill her? She’s a Jithii now, not Marianne Townsend.’

‘I... I couldn’t. I couldn’t kill like that. It made me think about Roz. Roz was everything to me and yet I couldn’t even remember who she was until now. We were trained to kill, you know, and here I was, actually considering shooting Townsend in cold blood.’ He looked at Lloyd, trying to ignore the anger on her face. ‘What kind of person am I? Was I?’

## HOW ARE YOU GETTING HOME?

‘How’s it going, Charley?’

Jason was pacing Tolland’s office, trying not to look at the sodden corpse they had shoved into a far corner. Connor, for her part, was busy tripping wires and trying to reprogram circuits and chips via a keyboard she had pilfered from the mess room, which normally told BABE what food they wanted (provided, of course, it was of a yeast base).

They had seen nothing of Townsend or Cassius. Nor had they heard from Emile or Chris. Jason was worried by this.

By now Benny would have received the holo he left for her, detailing his involvement with what was going on here. Although the group he was working for were paying him handsomely to deliver Chris, and presumably the data stored in his head, safely to them, he had been suspicious of them from the start. Then there was the fact that they knew he had known Chris Cwej (impossible in this era unless they had access to records going back - or forward - a few hundred years). And the Geneva Convention Corp weren’t anyone he’d heard of before.

But Chris had dreamt of dragons. Now, this might have been an almighty coincidence, but the Geneva Convention Corporation had a traditional dragon as their company emblem. And in the same way as he didn’t believe it was a coincidence that they found him to locate Chris, he didn’t believe that Chris’s dreams were a coincidence, either.

No doubt when they got safely back to Dellah to drop Emile off - and explain Charley Connor’s deal - Benny would say, ‘Oh, the Geneva Convention Corporation. Harmless old group of sad men. You weren’t in danger.’ Trouble was, he could picture, far clearer, Benny gasping and going, ‘You cretin,

what the frag were you doing getting Emile tied up with the Geneva Convention Corp? They make the Tzun look like firework manufacturers.'

Assuming they got back.

He'd lost the *Mother Fist* and doubted that any of the flitters aboard the *KayBee 2* could make it out of the rim and back into the system proper.

Which meant they needed not only to disable BABE, but to do it in such a way that control could be regained over the *KayBee 2*, to turn her away from whatever destination BABE had set her on. That meant removing the cybernetic pilot Connor had talked about, who in turn was controlled by BABE and linked directly into the ship's systems, thus avoiding, in theory, any chance of escaping prisoners stealing their own prison ship.

Great. Didn't the people who designed these things ever take into consideration that the biomorphic computer might go gaga, the crew and prisoners might be attacked by brain-eating parasites and a couple of space jocks might need to get home safely?

No. Obviously not.

'We're going to have to rely on the flitters, Charley. I can't see any way around it.'

'Then why,' Connor grunted, carefully replacing one chip with another, 'am I bothering to disrupt BABE?'

'So she doesn't kill us in the meantime.'

'You know, Jason, she could. Very easily.'

'How?'

'Cut off life support. We'd die in about two hours, if not sooner.'

Jason thought about this. 'Then the Jithii do need atmosphere to breathe in. Chris was on target. I wonder

There was a flash and a cry beside him, and Charlene Connor was hurled across the room, shaking violently, her hands clearly burnt and blistered.

The area she had been working in was protected suddenly by a laser lattice. It was only a miracle that Charley's hands hadn't been severed by the field.

‘Naughty, naughty, Mr Kane.’

Jason didn’t look up. He knew that BABE’s face was hovering above his head. ‘Why be so savage?’

‘Why not, Mr Kane? You are effectively trying to kill me. I’m only answering in kind. If Connor hadn’t moved at that moment, I’d have sliced her head off. Second-degree burns are nothing to that. I only need two of the women alive, and I already have Marianne Townsend.’

Jason looked up to see BABE wink and disappear.

‘Lisa DeJoine,’ he murmured.

Emile, DeJoine and their two new friends were in Bay 2, alongside the flitter they had taken to the planet.

‘It’ll never get us back home,’ Ryne said. ‘These things don’t have the range.’ He had already explained that BABE controlled the *KayBee 2* via the pilot and therefore trying to get home in her was pointless.

‘We could go out as far as possible, send out a distress signal and hope we get picked up.’ Emile thought this was a reasonably good suggestion.

Ryne obviously did, too. Or he realized it was their only option. ‘There are three flitters aboard.’ He looked at DeJoine. ‘Are they all working?’

‘As far as I know, yeah.’

‘The four of us, plus who?’

‘Tolland, Lloyd, Connor, Kane and Chris Cwej.’ She counted off on her fingers. ‘Spread over three flitters, that’s quite a good amount of life support for all of us. I’m assuming, by the way, it’s too late for Njobe or Cassius.’

Blummer coughed. ‘And Smokey. He’s still here somewhere.’

DeJoine sighed. ‘Look, I’m sorry about your cat, but we can’t really afford to lose valuable time hunting in a ship this size for something mog-sized.’

Ryne placed a hand on Blummer’s shoulder. ‘Sorry, Blummer, but she might be right.’

‘Aye, lad. Maybe. But I need to give it a good look. You two can get the flitters sorted out, can’t you?’ Ryne agreed.

‘Great. You boy, d’you know how to operate these flitters?’ Emile shook his head. ‘Good lad. Help me go a-cat-hunting, eh?’

Emile looked at DeJoine, who shrugged. ‘It’ll take about twenty minutes maximum. If Chris and the others arrive before then, we’ll get them away from here. Jason can fly one, Ryne here can take the second and you, Blummer, will be needed for this one. Which’ll be you two and the cat. If you stay here and die, that’s your lookout, agreed?’

‘Well get off, don’t worry,’ said Emile. ‘C’mon Mr Blummer, let’s find Smokey.’

DeJoine watched them leave the bay and shook her head, climbing into the flitter. ‘All this for a bloody cat. Madness.’

She started the powering-up operations. ‘I said it’s madness to try finding cats, isn’t it Ryne?’

She waited another couple of seconds, but he still didn’t reply.

‘I’ve got a bad feeling about this,’ she said, just to hear her own voice.

And looked back out of the hatchway of the flitter - straight into Cassius’s canine face, snarling.

Ryne was crumpled by the far wall - he’d hit it hard and fast, obviously.

Lisa DeJoine was not a brave woman, she knew that. Despite her involvement with the street gangs and troublemakers that had got her convicted in the first place, she would much rather be at home with a husband, two point five screaming kids and working weekends in a store or bar.

She was traditional like that. But of course it had been the wrong crowd at the wrong time...

Faced with a snarling Grutchia, DeJoine’s natural instinct was to scream. She’d already done so a couple of times today, so maybe she was all screamed out. Or maybe she was getting braver, less average.

So instead of screeching her lungs raw at Cassius’s obvious determination to attack her, she threw herself into his body,

slamming him aside for long enough for her to scrabble away and lunge towards Ryne.

He was breathing and -

The door to the bay opened, and she saw Emile wander in.

'Hey, Blummer's a big guy and -'

'Get away from here,' she bellowed.

But Cassius dived at her.

A lot of things flashed through Emile Mars-Smith's mind at the moment he saw Lisa DeJoine being mauled by Cassius.

First, that he had left Blummer up an air vent calling for Smokey, because there wasn't room for the two of them to do anything other than get in each other's way.

Secondly, that the Jithii had made no effort to get him, Chris or Jason. And Cassius had done nothing but throw his weight around, which tended to make him ask why the Jithii preferred the women.

And thirdly that if BABE had wanted to kill them all, it could probably have flooded the ship with coolant or gas or something lethal, which also suggested that the Jithii needed their human hosts alive to survive.

But the main thing that went through his young mind was that, if he didn't do something, Lisa DeJoine was going to die just as Grierson had. Or be a new host for a Jithii, which was probably worse.

So he grabbed a fire extinguisher from the wall and ran screaming at the Grutch.

Cassius stopped short of DeJoine and looked up, distracted. And Emile let the fire extinguisher off in his face, sending the Grutch, snarling and yelping, backward, trying to claw the freezing foam off his skin and out of his eyes.

DeJoine smiled briefly and snatched Ryne's hand.

Emile threw the extinguisher at Cassius's writhing body, stunning him further, and helped DeJoine get Ryne up.

The young navigator was beginning to come round and the three of them made it to the bay doors just as Cassius began bounding after them.



DeJoine slammed her palm on the door control and the doors slid shut before Cassius caught up with them.

‘He’ll open it from inside,’ Emile shouted at DeJoine.

‘Sod that,’ she snapped, hitting another door control.

There was a clang, muted from where they were, but clearly loud enough for Cassius, who stopped running and looked backward.

‘And just in case BABE has other ideas,’ DeJoine added, ‘stop this, you overgrown scanner.’ She frantically punched every button on the door lock randomly so that the command pathways became overloaded and automatically shut down until the self-repair systems could run a diagnostic.

The outer doors to the bay immediately stopped opening, but there was gap enough.

The air inside the bay was shooting out, taking everything not heavy enough with it. Things that were too big merely bounced against the doors.

And Cassius slammed into them as well.

Emile knew it had to be horrible, but he was fascinated to watch. So many holos and comics depicted death by decompression, in a variety of different ways.

But the reality was a mixture of all of them.

As the pressure around Cassius’s body vanished, the internal pressures of that body burst the Grutchia apart. Like an explosion without any fire.

If there was anything left of him or the Jithii, they were out into space in less than a second.

‘Well, that’s one less shuttle we can use,’ Ryne said, shaking his head to clear it.

Emile gave a quizzical look.

‘Well, unless you’ve got enough spacesuits for all of us, plus antigravity boots, we can’t afford to open this door again.’

Blummer was in the dark, crawling along a horizontal shaft, making kissy noises and hoping that Smokey would turn up quickly. Not just because he knew they had to get off the ship

as quickly as possible but because the shaft was getting thinner. Unlike his girth.

And also because if any of the old rumours were true, bizarre alien creatures that ate shaft repair men probably lived in dark, gloomy places like this.

When Smokey said 'Miaow' in his ear very unexpectedly, not only did Blummer yell in fear, but he knocked himself senseless on the shaft ceiling.

Smokey, not really comprehending why his Chief Feeder was there in the first place, because of course he wasn't lost - cats *never* get lost - wandered back down the shaft towards the light.

The danger to the Feeders had lessened recently, he could sense that. But there was still danger for him to deal with.

A few moments later, Blummer came to, and, grumbling madly, began to shuffle backward out of the shaft, hoping that Smokey had had the sense to go out and not further in.

Chris and Lloyd were pelting down the corridor away from the medical area.

'Let's get to Jason and Charley,' she shouted. 'Maybe Tolland has come up with some magical way out of this.'

'No he hasn't.' Jason stepped out in front of them, an unconscious Connor in his arms.

Lloyd winced as she saw the burns. 'BABE fought back?'

Jason nodded. 'Any luck your end?'

Lloyd shrugged. 'Mr Conscience here had the chance to blast Townsend and her Jithii parasite into squillions of pieces. He chickened out.'

Jason stared at Chris, who nodded. 'Roz,' he said simply.

'Chris, what happened to Roz was a tragedy. You can't run from violence all the time because of what happened to Roz.' He passed Connor over to Chris. 'Now, super-hunk, you carry the lady. You're far stronger than I am. Get her to one of the flitters. I think they're our only way off this ship.'

Chris nodded and walked away.

After a moment, Lloyd shook her head. 'OK, his friend died. But he's a liability, Jason. I'm sorry.'

‘It’s his memory. If it was intact, he’d be fine. When Chris’s memories are fully restored, he’ll be OK about Roz, but right now, they’re his strongest memories.’

‘Yeah, OK. But he’s still our weakest link at the moment. I don’t want to be in a situation where we have to rely on him to save our lives.’

Jason shrugged. ‘We might not have that choice.’

And a chunk of wall beside him melted into slag.

Townsend was just behind Lloyd, firing wildly.

‘We’ll finish this conversation later,’ he yelled, yanking Lloyd around the corner.

‘Chris,’ he bellowed. ‘Chris, get running!’

They almost collided with Chris, who was standing just outside Bay 3, staring at a fat man in a Prison Service uniform, now holding Connor. Chris was hugging a grey cat with a red eye patch.

‘Wolsey,’ Chris said brightly.

‘No, Smokey,’ said the man.

‘I know, but he’s just brought it all back.’ Chris grinned at Jason. ‘Jason Kane! It’s just come back to me. Everything.’

‘Party on later, Chris,’ Jason said. ‘There’s a Jithii host behind us, with a gun.’

Chris looked at Lloyd. ‘I’m sorry about before, but I can end this now.’

He grabbed her blaster and ran to meet Townsend.

The last thing they heard was Chris’s cheerful cry of ‘Just like old times, eh, Jase?’

‘No. Not really,’ Jason said quietly. ‘In the old times we survived to talk about it.’

He hurried them all into Bay 3.

Lloyd and Blummer eased Connor into the back of the flitter, and she met Jason at the doors. ‘You take this one, Lloyd. I’ll find the others and we’ll take the other two flitters. Head back to the coordinates of the blue planet. With luck, some AMS ship will patrol in the next couple of days.’

I hope, he added to himself.

Lloyd clearly didn’t believe it either. ‘Great. I get Fatso and a cat. I hope Connor wakes up soon.’

‘Fatso,’ called Blummer from inside the flitter, ‘heard that. I also know something about first aid and will get on with dressing this poor girl’s hands.’

Lloyd almost smiled. ‘Me and my big mouth. See you later, Jason.’

Jason smiled. ‘Look after Charley, OK?’

Lloyd nodded. ‘I won’t let her down, don’t worry. You’ll have to open the outer doors manually, and then jam them open.’

Jason got out of the bay and closed the doors. ‘I hope BABE’s otherwise occupied.’ He watched Lloyd climb aboard the flitter and seal the hatchway. He opened the outer door, counting as they crawled apart. ‘C’mon, just wide enough for the bloody shuttle, OK?’

As soon as they were inside, he smashed the door controls. BABE couldn’t override it.

Of course, it’d be prepared for the next two.

Njobe staggered up, her flesh burnt away, her face now a charred mess.

But her cybernetic parts were working just fine. ‘BABE!’ she demanded. ‘Status?’

BABE’s face materialized, but it was flickering, as if its power was shorting out. ‘Lloyd, Connor and Co-Pilot Blummer have escaped the *KayBee 2*. Cassius and his Jithii are dead. Governor Tolland is dead.’

‘What has happened to you?’

‘Charlene Connor disrupted some of my subroutines. I can no longer control as much of this ship simultaneously as I could. I cannot store as much information as before. I have downloaded much into the ship’s storage databanks.’

‘That was an error, BABE. Concentrate on the flitter bays. I’m going to protect Townsend. We need to get her away in one of the flitters along with Chris Cwej. The others are to die.’

BABE flickered for a moment. ‘Under... understood.’

‘Then understand this, BABE. Seeing as the Knights saw fit to give you the ability, paranoid as they are, use your self-destruct system aboard this ship. Set all the circuitry to

overload and ensure that not so much as one molecule remains to be looked at by the PS Inspectorate. Once I am safely away with Townsend and Cwej, obliterate everything. None of our plans or databases can be allowed to fall into anyone else's hands. The Knights have waited too long for this.'

'I... I *cannot* do... that

'Why not?'

'I would... would die.'

Njobe snorted. 'You, BABE, are irrelevant. All that matters is protecting the Knights. That is your primary function. Confirm.'

Nothing.

'Confirm!'

'Confirmed...'

Njobe staggered out of the medical bay.

And the lights on the ship dipped to a dull blood-red, casting huge shadows everywhere.

'Holy crap!' Ryne grabbed his two new friends. 'What's BABE doing?'

'You tell us,' suggested Emile, already a bit fed up with Ryne's nervousness.

'Either the hull's been breached, which it can't have been because we'd be dead...'

'Or?'

'Or,' added Jason as he ran towards them, 'BABE's just put this ship on to self-destruct. We've got to use the last two flitters to get off here.'

DeJoine smiled weakly. 'Problem, we've bugged up the door encoder to one. At least, the bay's useless. Decompressed.'

Jason swore. 'OK, which one is operable?'

'Bay one,' said Ryne. 'Who are you?'

'Introductions later.' He looked at Emile. 'How's it going, partner? Can you get these two away from here? Meet Lloyd and Blummer at the blue planet?'

'And you?' Emile was dreading what was coming next.

'I'll find a way. But I need to collect Chris and make sure the Jithii don't escape.'

'We killed one,' DeJoine said.

'Fab. Well done. Now, get going.'

'I'm not going without you, "partner". Benny's just as likely to string me up for losing you, you know.' Emile folded his arms.

'Yeah, you're right, 'Meel. Let's all die together.'

And he swung his fist into the side of Emile's head. The boy crumpled. 'He'll thank me one day.'

Ryne reached down and, grunting with the effort, slung Emile over his shoulder. 'If we get out of this alive, matey, make sure he loses some weight.'

Jason nodded. 'Good luck.'

DeJoine tried to smile back. 'You too.'

Jason watched them head for Bay 1.

Then he ran back to the medical area. He needed to keep BABE occupied.

Chris was facing Townsend, both aiming their blasters at each other. The red flashing light was making them both look demonic, underlighting their faces.

'Let me enter your mind, Christopher Cwej.' The mouth moving was Townsend's but the voice in Chris's head was alien, ethereal.

It was the Jithii.

'The Knights have other methods,' he said out loud. 'Why don't you give up? We both know that this isn't the end of the road for the Knights. I have so much information, you could stop the parasitical life cycle. This is an abomination. Baygent would have loathed this.'

'The Knights have programmed us to do this. They have created us.'

Townsend suddenly grabbed Chris's chin and, before he could fire his blaster, it was there, in his mind.

Townsend crumpled to the floor, her own blaster bouncing away.

*Feel me, Cwej. Feel my power. Together, we can propagate, pass the seeds on. Human and Jithii, the perfect combination. We can find the DNA, begin the Baygent Apotheosis. It is what we must do. We must go forward, progress, learn. Exist. Move from host to host. It is our right.*

‘Yes, but I have a right to survive and exist, too. My right is as much as yours.’

*Superiority will win, Cwej. With us the Knights have created the perfect gestalt. We will exist, undetected in the DNA of our descendants. Yours and this woman’s. Passed through the subsequent generations. We will find the true descendant as is our purpose.*

‘Yes, all right. You win. I have nothing to live for here. To strive for. Take me.’

Chris opened his mind to the Jithii.

Jason picked up a stool and smashed every computer bank he could find in the medical lab.

‘Hope this is keeping you busy, BABE,’ he muttered. ‘Come on, fight back. Fight me. Like you did Charley Connor, burn me!’

BABE’s face pixelled in front of him, eyes wider than normal.

It looked scared.

He smashed the stool on to another computer.

And BABE’s face dissolved into tiny coloured blobs, which faded.

Jason let the stool drop from his fingers, and turned to run. To find Chris.

Instead he faced a cybernetic human that was wearing the remnants of a medical officer’s uniform.

‘Doctor Njobe, I presume?’

She smashed her fist into the wall, buckling it.

‘Imagine that is your head, Kane.’

‘I take your point, doctor.’ He snatched a quick look around the room. ‘I appear to have deactivated BABE. Sorry.’

‘Its work was over. This ship is going to go bang in about five minutes.’

'You and me together, then. DeJoine should have launched the other flitter by now. And the third is no good. It's in a depressurized bay area. Sorry.'

Njobe laughed. A nasty, gurgling sort of laugh. She pointed at her metallic head with a metallic finger. 'Do I look like I need to breathe oxygen, Kane?'

'Ah. Good point. Fifteen love, as they used to say back home.'

'Game, set and match already, Kane. But rest assured: I am going to rip your arms off first, and leave you to bleed everywhere. Just for the hell of it.'

'Why, Njobe? I see that BABE was working for the Knights, programmed to ensure both the safety of the Jithii and get the secrets stored in Chris's mind back to civilization, but why you?'

'Once the Knights elected this ship as the carrier for the Apotheosis, they needed someone aboard who could act as a physical extension of BABE. To interact with the prisoners and ensure that Cwej was safe. Replacing a prisoner was difficult, the medical officer far easier. I was necessary to ensure the help of the Grutchas and aid in the transfer of the Jithii to more appropriate hosts when necessary. BABE could have done none of that. It needed a... a human touch.'

Jason smiled humourlessly. 'Yeah, you're a real "human touch". Mind you, you had all of us fooled. Very well done. The Knights would have been pleased. What of the *Trigan*? What was her part in all this?'

'To find Cwej. As APS people, he would probably trust them. One of our agents ensured the destruction of the ship and crew. However, the Knights had miscalculated how aggressive the Jithii would be and they killed the two agents. When the Knights received a communication from the chamber's computers to this effect, BABE and I were dispatched to retrieve the Jithii. Machine life is far more reliable.'

Jason crossed behind a gurney, keeping distance between himself and Njobe. 'And me? Why send me?'



'You were expendable. As with the two from the *Trigan*, a device to bring Cwej to safety - he was more likely to trust a face he thought familiar than any of the prisoners, especially with his background as an Adjudicator. One of our agents, researching Cwej, discovered the link between him and you and your ex-wife. You were the easier to obtain. The Knights are not financially bereft and your greed is easier to manipulate than your ex-wife's.'

'As is my curiosity.'

'Oh, no. Professor Summerfield is, according to our agent, far more likely to want to get involved. But she is far more careful, and could have been a problem. Your need to impress the professor made you a far more appropriate subject for exploitation.'

'Why, thank you, Doc With a sudden cry Jason tripped backward, and hit the floor, knocking most of the breath from his body.

'Clumsy,' taunted Njobe.

'Nope,' said Jason. 'Clever.'

He reached out and scooped up one of Townsend's dropped blasters he'd spied earlier.

And fired at point-blank range into Njobe's face.

Her head was vaporized instantly and he rolled aside just in time as the body flopped to the floor.

Just to make sure, he blew the torso in half, flinching as some very human-looking fluids gushed everywhere.

'Funny,' he said. 'I thought I was going to bleed to death. You need to see a good doctor, Doctor.'

And he went to find Chris.

Chris was frowning. Well, mentally at least as he felt the blackness of the Jithii invade his mind. 'You're absorbing all the information about the Knights of Jeneve from my mind. Why?'

*It's safer with the Jithii than with you. I need your mind to be blank. I will create a new personality for you.*

'Dig deeper. Explore the sides of my mind not normally used. That's the best place for you to hide.'

*Yes. Yes, untapped, unexplored un—*

‘Except you’re wrong. You see, as Njobe explained earlier, I’m a reasonably talented psi. Oh, I can’t actually use it, but it gives me the strength to use that portion of my brain, Jithii. I’m trained, you see, to avoid hypnotism, to avoid mind control. That’s the reason why, when the Knights put their information in my brain, it couldn’t wipe it completely. That’s why so much of the real Chris Cwej is here. Was there. It needed a trigger. Sending Jason to retrieve me, in case all this went wrong, was a mistake. And the Knights aren’t used to making mistakes, are they? They thought he would risk everything for me. They didn’t realize that “me” was still there to be rescued.’

*No, don’t do this... don’t force the Jithii out. Embrace the Jithii.*

Chris forced himself to stand up. Concentrated on making his body answer his commands.

*The Jithii must live... to host the Jithii is... power...*

‘No, my right to exist is my power.’

And the Jithii was gone, expunged from Chris’s mind. Straight back into Townsend’s comatose body.

Chris opened his eyes, raised his blaster and aimed.

‘I’m really sorry, Marianne.’

He blasted her at point-blank range three times.

Jason smashed open the lockers. Five total-survival suits. He needed only two.

He grabbed them, humping the oxygen supply on to his back. ‘Hope this is enough.’

When he found Chris, the guy was standing aiming his blaster at what might once have been Marianne Townsend.

Hell, that must have been difficult. Chris was an Adjudicator, a policeman, by trade. But killing in cold blood, that was more Jason Kane than Chris Cwej.

‘You OK, Chris?’ he asked, knowing what a stupid question it was. ‘We’ve about two and a half minutes to get through a locked door into a depressurized bay and start up a flitter before this lot goes bang.’

‘As I said,’ Chris started putting a TSS suit on, ‘just like old times.’

Jason had assumed they would need to spacewalk to the flitter but the rear doors were closed. Bay 2 was repressurized after all.

‘Lisa bloody DeJoine. Doesn’t know what she’s talking about,’ groaned Jason. ‘The door panel is fine.’ He punched in the access code Lloyd had shown him when they had first arrived aboard the *KayBee 2* and they had immediate access to the flitter.

‘Let’s get going,’ Chris suggested and still in their suits they ran as quickly as possible into the bay.

‘Bugger regulations,’ Jason laughed, and started the flitter up without any pre-ignition checks. ‘If she blows up, well, we won’t know.’

‘Gee, thanks, Jase. That’s a comfort. What about the doors?’

‘DeJoine was just wrong, that’s all.’ Jason operated the doors automatically from the flitter’s navcom. They opened. ‘See! We’ve got about fifty seconds.’

Chris nodded. ‘Hope it’s enough.’

‘Hey, I’m the super space pilot, remember?’ Jason shot the flitter forward, just getting out through the doors when they were wide enough.

They kept going, as far from the *KayBee 2* as they could in fifty seconds.

Eighteen seconds out, they were buffeted as the huge scavenger ship vanished in a flash of instantly extinguished plasma.

‘That was not fifty seconds, Jason Kane!’

Jason laughed from inside his space helmet. ‘Nope. But if I’d told you the truth, you’d have been panicking. Just like old times.’

Chris wasn’t laughing back. He was pointing behind them.

‘I don’t think Lisa DeJoine did get it wrong, Jase. I think we were helped.’

Jason turned to see BABE's Marilyn Monroe visage floating behind him.

'I downloaded myself into this system,' it said. 'I now control everything.'

Jason sighed. 'Some people just don't know when to quit.'

'How much air in your tanks, gentlemen?'

'About an hour. Why?'

But Jason already guessed the answer. 'Because this flitter's life support has just died. And so will you. In about fifty-nine minutes.'

'You know,' Chris said, fingering his blaster, 'I'm getting awfully tired of doing things to a well-timed schedule.'

'Are you, Christopher? How sad.'

'Yes, BABE. I am. I'm going for a walk outside. I may be some time.'

'Me, too.' Jason picked up his own blaster. 'Full overload, Chris?'

'Full overload, Jason.'

BABE frowned. 'You are mad, you can't survive outside in space.'

'We can. For about fifty-seven minutes. You and this flitter however, have about, oh, thirty seconds.'

Jason reached over to the manual lock on the hatchway and activated it. With a silent burst of the last bits of air inside the flitter, it shot away into space.

Jason calmly walked out first, Chris just behind him, attaching a cable from his suit to Jason's.

He kicked the side of the flitter, pushing the two of them away at some speed.

Both managed to turn themselves in time to see their overloaded blasters explode, erasing BABE and the flitter completely.

Well, Jason thought, now we're bugged.

'What happened?'

Lloyd shrugged. 'I don't know. I assumed they'd found a way to use the other flitter but it just, well, blew up.'

Connor, her bandaged hands pressed against the window, stared at where the flitter had been. 'Damn them.'

Smokey mewed and jumped off Blummer's lap and up at the window. And mewed again.

Used to Smokey's bizarre ways, Blummer stared where the cat was staring. 'Ladies, I think you did right to wait around. Look.'

And they saw the two space-suited figures floating aimlessly in the void.

'Mr Blummer?' Lloyd smiled.

'Fatso was the name I think you preferred, ma'am. And yes, I can decompress the area around the hatchway and yes, I can retrieve them. Is that what you wanted to know?'

Lloyd laughed. 'Spot on, Stanley. Spot on.'

## THIS TOWN AIN'T BIG ENOUGH FOR THE BOTH OF US

*'Hi, this is DNN, bringing you all the Dellah news from the planet and beyond. I'm Jake Garrett.*

*'News fresh in from the outer rim worlds - the re-elected Admin-Proctor of the System Administration, Lucinda Vrana, has officially declared the recent Ardethe expedition a disaster and closed down the department responsible for launching it. The families of the AMS crew and university students have been informed that their loved ones are officially declared Missing, Presumed Dead, and the colleges responsible will be making claims on their insurance policies to reimburse the families for their losses. The Admin-Proctor described the whole tragedy as something she would ensure never happened again, and that stringent new laws would be passed to stop potentially ill-equipped similar missions, although she stressed that there was no accusation that this particular expedition had been underfunded or skimped on.*

*"This has been a tragedy for all concerned. The Administration must never let it happen again and my Office will be passing new laws to ensure underfunding and ill-equipped expeditions cannot be mounted again. Although it behoves me to point out that, as it was an Administration Military venture, there is no suggestion that this expedition was anything less than one hundred per cent efficient."*

*'Lucinda Vrana this afternoon.*

*'Other news just in - System Administration Central has today announced that it is to revise its procedures over scavenger patrols following the destruction of the scavenger ship KayBee 2 three days ago, with the loss of all hands. The service was particularly saddened by the loss of former*

*decorated hero Oliver Tolland, governor of the ship. No cause for the inexplicable explosion has been offered, although damage-control teams are flying out to inspect any debris they can locate. The ship was a long way off course and among the theories being offered by our sources in the service was that either the Artificial Biomorphic Intelligence had gone awry, or that the prisoners revolted. If it is the former, it will no doubt reinforce many recent calls for the computers, or Biomorphic Artificial Brains — nicknamed BABEs - to be discontinued. That in itself brings up ethical and moral questions, according to religious leaders, who claim that AIs are a sentient life form themselves.*

*‘And that was DNN, bringing you all the Dellah news from the planet and beyond. I’m Jake Garrett.’*

Dellah.

Emile Mars-Smith had begun to think he would never see it again. Never see Benny, or Tameka or baby Jock again.

And here he was, on one of the tables just outside the Witch and Whirlwind, sipping coffee and waving a fluffy toy cat at Jock, who gurgled with delight.

Or wind.

Emile wasn’t particularly up on babies to know the difference. ‘Unca Jason-Wason was saved by a puddy-tat like this, little Jock. And Unca ‘Meel is going to be nice about cats for the rest of his life.’

Tameka smiled. ‘He loves that toy, ‘Meel. Thank you for getting it for him.’

Emile shrugged. ‘Yeah, well, when you’ve been trapped in underground cities, chased by gas-based brain-eaters, savaged by a dog-man and fought off a cyborg doctor, you learn to appreciate things. And, worst of all, I survived Jason’s flying, there and back.’

Emile momentarily closed his eyes as another hand gripped his and squeezed. ‘I think you were very brave. I’m proud to know you.’

Emile took a deep breath and smiled, opening his eyes to look at Scott. ‘And I’m glad I know you, too.’ He waved the toy

cat in Scott's face. 'Otherwise I wouldn't be Unca 'Meel to little Jock here would I?'

'Morning, youngsters. Any room for a sad old space pirate?'

Tameka pulled another seat over for Jason.

'Seen Benny since we got back?'

Emile shook his head. 'But she'll be here soon. She won't want to miss you.'

'I'm not so sure. I half expect that I'm the reason she's not around.'

'Well, don't flatter yourself, cowboy.'

Emile couldn't stop the grin splitting his face.

'Hiya Professor S. We got back.'

Tameka and Scott smiled their goodbyes and walked off with Jock and the toy cat.

Bernice sat down, along with Braxiatel.

The academician coughed slightly. 'Well, Jason, you'll be pleased to know that I can find no record anywhere of a Charlene Connor, Siobhan Lloyd or Lisa DeJoine having ever landed on Dellah. If such people do exist, and do intend to stay here, the computers in the university have no records on them at all. Should they choose to leave Dellah, there will therefore be no record of them.'

'Thanks, Irving. Lloyd's going home to try to locate her girlfriend, although she thinks she'll have problems with the authorities there.'

'Can't see why,' Emile chipped in. 'After all, she's officially dead.'

'And Lisa?' Jason asked.

'Ah, the delightful Ms DeJoine.' Braxiatel pointed towards the Shakespeare Building. 'It just happens that the head of that establishment is never there to do his job, so he needed an assistant to actually be on site and answer questions. It will be a great weight off his mind to know that someone is there.'

Wolsey appeared from around the corner of the pub.

And Emile watched Bernice's face as she saw Chris Cwej for the first time. Slowly she stood up and then walked towards him, as if unsure how to greet him.



‘Hi.’

‘Hi.’

‘Jason said your memory was playing up. I don’t know if you remember me but I’m -’

‘Benny!’ Chris grabbed her and pulled her off the ground in a huge bear hug, kissing her neck. As he put her back down, she kissed him affectionately on the cheek.

‘Missed you, Adjudicator Cwej. Good to have you back.’

‘Thank you, Benny.’ He offered his hand to Braxiatel. ‘Good to see you again, sir. Glad to see Benny’s in good hands.’

‘The pleasure is all mine, young man. I’ve heard so much about you.’

Chris look confused.

‘Don’t worry, Chris,’ Bernice said, laughing. ‘Your memory’s fine. Irving hasn’t actually gone to my wedding yet.’

‘Our wedding, if you don’t mind,’ Jason said quietly.

‘She keeps saying that when I do go, I should stop it happening.’ Braxiatel sat down again, and Chris settled beside him.

Jason looked down at the table, desperately trying not to catch Bernice’s eye. ‘And would you?’

Braxiatel looked at them both. ‘Do you honestly regret your time together, no matter how brief? How traumatic?’

Jason looked up, and straight at Bernice. ‘I might handle things differently, but no. If I could go back in time, I don’t think I’d pass it over.’

‘Benny?’

Bernice sucked her bottom lip. ‘I’m afraid I really can’t answer that, Irving. I just don’t know.’ She looked straight at Jason. ‘It’s too soon to rewrite the past. Or prejudice the future.’

‘And for that reason alone, the answer is no. When I go to your wedding and they ask that bit about anyone who knows just cause and impediment, I shall make sure everything is quiet as a mouse.’

Chris laughed, until a look from both Jason and Bernice stopped him. ‘Sorry. Private joke.’

‘Irving,’ said Jason. ‘Thank you for helping the girls. And Blummer and Ryne.’

‘I gather they’re going with you,’ Braxiatel said.

Jason nodded. ‘God knows what I’ve done to deserve that punishment, but they only want to go around the galaxy two or three times. With luck, they’ll get bored and go home.’

‘But they’re dead as well,’ Emile said.

Jason shrugged. ‘The twenty-sixth century is full of dead people walking around quite healthily.’

‘Only in the dodgy circles you hang around in,’ muttered Bernice.

‘What about you, ‘Meel? Fancy a spin?’

Emile looked at Jason. Then at Bernice and Chris. ‘One day, Jase, yeah. But right now, I’ve got some exams to get through. But please don’t lose touch.’

‘Well, I don’t intend making a habit of coming to Dellah. But here - I got a spare.’ He gave Emile one of the green spherical homing devices. ‘Use it when you want to call me, OK?’

‘OK, partner.’

Bernice stood up. ‘Right, I’d better see about getting Chris some rooms here. I’ll see you all later and -’

Bernice stopped as a slender woman with cropped blonde hair slinked towards their table, grinning.

‘Hello. Who’s this?’

Jason stood up and took the woman’s hands which, Emile noticed, were still bandaged.

‘Uh, Benny, this is Charlene Connor. My fiancée. She proposed and I’ve accepted.’ A look of apology crossed his face. ‘*Please* don’t kill her.’